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Lesson Twenty: The Eternal Nature of Punishment

The eternal nature of the punishment that the faithless and wicked are to suffer in hellfire presents a problem for many people. Given the fact that evil acts are marked by the finiteness of the world, how, they ask, can requital for those acts be eternal and everlasting? Can there be any common measure between a finite act and an infinite punishment?

A punishment that is to extend over an indefinite future does indeed represent an extreme form of torment; it is terrifying and induces a shudder merely to think of a punishment for which no limit is set in time.

It is also true that according to human judicial systems and penal provisions the punishment of lawbreakers and offenders is fixed according to the crimes they have committed; some punishments are brief in duration while others last longer. The offences men commit are not uniform, either qualitatively or quantitatively, and the penalties awarded them also cannot be uniform.

We must remind ourselves at this point that utter justice prevails in God's judging of men, for an accounting will be made of even the slightest of deeds. Neither an atom's weight of good shall remain unrewarded nor shall a single offender escape punishment, unless he benefit from God's forgiveness and mercy. How then could the punishment dispensed by God not be precisely commensurate with the offence?

If no one objects to the eternity of the paradise in which the blessed reside, this is because paradise and hellfire are not founded on a common basis. There is a manifest difference between eternal punishment and eternal reward. The reward that God dispenses without measure derives from His generosity and mercy, and no one therefore raises any objection. The objection pertains only to faithless evildoers residing eternally in hellfire, without their torment being lessened for a single instant.

Is such a punishment for the necessarily limited and finite sin and corruption of which the sinner was

guilty compatible with the principle of divine justice, even if they dominated his whole life? Let us suppose someone spends his whole life in the swamp of atheism, unbelief and corruption; it cannot last much more than a century, which is like a brief instant when compared with eternity.

In their attempt to resolve this contradiction between the justice of God and the eternity of punishment, some scholars have interpreted the word *khulud* (eternity) occurring in verses that deal with the punishment of sinners in the extended sense of "a period of indefinite length," thereby freeing their minds from this troublesome burden.

This interpretation is, however, unacceptable and unrealistic. Apart from the fact that it is not supported by any reliable proof, there is the general principle that we are permitted to make such interpretations only when they do not clash with the clear and obvious sense of the verse. The Qur'an is quite clear in assigning the terrible fate of eternal punishment to a certain group of persons who in a sense have freely created it for themselves. Indeed, the Qur'an can be said itself to refute firmly such mitigating interpretations:

"Do they not know that the punishment of whomsoever opposes God and His Messenger is the fire of hell, to reside therein eternally?" (**9:63**).

"They are those whose lot in the hereafter will be nothing but the fire" (**11:16**).

"Those who engaged in disbelief and called Our signs lies are the people of hellfire; they shall dwell in it eternally" (**2:39**).

"Whoever among you Muslims turns back from his religion and dies in a state of unbelief, his deeds shall vanish, both in this world and the hereafter, and he will always be a companion of the fire" (**2:217**).

Given the clarity of these verses, it is not possible to give them same special interpretation in order to deny the permanence of the punishment of hellfire. The text of the verses proclaims that permanent residence in hellfire shall be the lot of those unbelievers for whom all possible avenues to salvation are blocked. As for those who have committed a certain number of lesser sins and offences, they shall either spend an appropriate amount of time in hellfire or receive the kindness and forgiveness of God.

The Fear of God and its Moral Effect

It is the fear of God's just punishments that motivates many people to observe His laws, and such fear, being grounded in religious faith, has an infinitely greater effect on men's souls than coercion and force. If a person accustoms himself to shunning God's wrath, society will be protected from the sins he might otherwise have committed. Piety is, then, a powerful watchman; whenever the influence of religious teaching fades, crimes begin to increase.

Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, says:

"The one who knows that God sees and hears his speech and that He is aware of all his deeds, both good and bad, is restrained by this knowledge and the faith on which it rests from all kinds of sin. Such a person will fear his Lord and refuse to follow the inclinations of desire." (*Tafsir al-Burhan,* p. 1071)

This type of fear is quite different from those noxious fears which arise from weakness and humiliation and, far from impelling man to do anything useful, bar his path to progress and happiness. The fear that results from concern for the ultimate outcome of one's actions is like a warning to man not to pollute himself with sin but instead to embark on the path of duty and responsibility which guarantees true happiness and success. Fear of the unpleasant consequences of an harmful act transforms man into a disciplined being, one marked by caution, prudence and foresight. Such a person will perform all his tasks, great or small, with the utmost care and trustworthiness. He will reflect at all times on the greatness and magnificence of the Creator, and, suspended between hope and fear, as religion dictates, he both hopes for God's infinite favor and is heedful of the consequences of his acts, being sure not to fall into the trap of desire or arrogance. Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, said:

"Fear and anxiety are like watchmen set over man's heart while hope is an intercessor on behalf of the self and its needs. Those who know God hope for His favor while they fear Him. Hope and fear are like the two wings of faith, and it is only those believers who possess both can fly toward the station of God's pleasure.

"With the eye of intellect they look upon God's exhortations and threats. The fear of God directs their attention to God's justice, which is identical with His essence, and prevents them from polluting themselves with sin. Hope in God summons them to receive His favor and generosity. In short, hope keeps the heart alive, while fear suppresses satanic inclination." (*Muhajjat al-Bayda,* Vol. VII, p. 283)

Speaking of the positive effect of the awareness of death, Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, said on another occasion:

"The awareness of death drives away from man's inner being all lust and illicit passion; severe the roots of negligence and lack of awareness; strengthens the hope of the heart for the fulfillment of God's promises; softens and makes tender his nature, shatters the signs and emblems of idolatry; quenches the fire of greed; and displays to him the pettiness and worthlessness of the world. This is what is implied in the saying of the Most Noble Messenger: `An hour's reflection is worth more than a year's worship.' (*Bihar al-Anwar,* Vol. III, p. 128)

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Immersion in the affairs of this world does indeed place a veil of oblivion and neglect before the vision of man, it causes him to turn his back on lofty spiritual values, so that in the end he meets death empty-handed.

One day, the Commander of the Faithful, `Ali, upon whom be peace, entered the market of Basra. He saw people utterly absorbed in themselves and the business of buying and selling; it was as if death and resurrection would never happen. This atmosphere of negligence deeply disturbed him, so he wept and said: "O servants of the world, O slaves to the worldly!

Throughout the day you are busy buying and selling, swearing oaths as you do so, and your nights are spent in sleep and a state of complete unawareness. So day and night you are unaware of the hereafter and the outcome of your affair; when, then will you prepare yourselves for the journey that awaits you, and when will you gather the provisions you need? When will you begin to remember the hereafter and resurrection?" (*Safinat al-Bihar,* Vol. I, p. 674)

Imam al-Sajjad, upon whom be peace, said while addressing God in prayer,

"O God, prolong my life as long as its days are spent in worship and obedience to You. If a moment should come when my life becomes the pasture of Satan, take my soul and bring my life to an end before Your dislike overtakes me or Your anger seizes me." ("Du'a-yi Makarim al-Akhlaq" in *Sahifa-yi Sajjadiya*)

At the same time, as long as man is in this world, he desires certain bodily pleasures and enjoyments. This urgent longing is a general one, not confined to a given group of people. The objects of this desire represent indeed a necessity, which is brought to an end only by death. Accordingly, God does not deprive anyone of these pleasures (in their pure and licit form), nor does He encourage anyone to turn away completely from the affairs of this world.

However, He does encourage man to redirect his hopes away from the false and impermanent values of this world toward true values and genuine aspirations; He warns him not to be deceived by the transient and ambiguous pleasures of this world or to become so attached to his desires and longings that he is deprived of lasting reward in the hereafter. In other words, man is exhorted to devote his attention at all times to seeking the pleasure and satisfaction of God.

Acts and Punishments

Now let us see how it is possible to accept the lack of proportion that appears to be present in God's punishing the unbelievers, criminals and tyrants with an eternity in hellfire. How can such an apparent departure from justice be attributed to God?

Once we begin to look at this question with some degree of profundity, we will see that it is implicitly based on the incorrect assumption that punishments in the next world are unchanging and fixed in accordance with the legislator's assessment of the degree of the crime that is to be punished. Once this assumption is made, there is indeed no way of reconciling an eternity in hellfire with the necessarily finite nature of any offence.

However, the relationship between a deed and its punishment is a natural and ontological relationship, the latter being the fruit and result of the former; the punishment is not fixed for the deed by means of a set of fixed juridical criteria. Once this is understood, the problem can easily be resolved.

The pain and torment that the sinner suffers after resurrection are themselves properties of the deed, properties which have a natural continuation and therefore pursue the sinner in the hereafter. The Qur'an indicates this in the following verses:

"Their evil deeds will become apparent before them, and that which they mocked will befall them" (**45:33**).

"They will find that which they did present before them, and God shall not wrong anyone" (**18:49**).

"On the day of resurrection, men shall come forth separately from their graves to confront their deeds; all who have done an atom's weight of good shall see it, and all who have done an atom's weight of evil shall see it" (**99:6-8**).

"Whoever has done a good deed will find it before him on the day of resurrection, and likewise whatever ugly and sinful act he may have committed" (**3:30**).

Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, said:

"Gabriel came to meet the Most Noble Messenger and said to him, `O Muhammad, lead your life as you wish but ultimately you will be brought face to face with death. Love whomever you wish, but ultimately the day will come when you must bid him farewell and be parted from him. Do whatever you wish while in this world, but on the day of resurrection you shall find your deeds before you again." (*al-Kafi,* Vol. III, p. 255)

What is meant by the seeing of deeds in the hereafter is man's being confronted with the shape and form his deeds have assumed in conformity to the conditions of that realm.

Despite our assumption that our deeds are the matter of an instant, lacking all permanence, they weigh so heavily in certain instances that they penetrate all dimensions of existence.

The following example may help us to understand what is meant. Imagine someone whose outlook is entirely negative and who wears at all times the spectacles of pessimism. Such a person will see the entire world shrouded in a black veil of darkness. Instead of being filled with joy or tranquillity by the wonders and subtleties of the natural realm, his spirit will be oppressed and borne down by his pessimistic mode of thought.

He will never be able to remove the dark veil he has fashioned from the entrancing visage that every created phenomenon would otherwise present. This painful pessimism cannot fail to create a painful torment within his soul, giving rise there to desperation and misery. It can even be said to be more

painful than blindness, for while the blind are deprived from seeing the beauteous aspect of the world, the pessimist suffers acute misery anew whenever he beholds each of the countless phenomena of creation.

From one point of view, the pessimism of such an individual can be said to be limited and finite, but since it is multiplied by all the phenomena he encounters in the world, it can also be said to be infinite: the pessimist finds himself confronted by innumerable instances of blackness, ugliness and evil.

Let us suppose that someone leads another one to the wrong path, and that the offspring of the one whom he has lead astray persist on that path. Each of the offspring then commits thousands of sins and corrupt acts. All those evil deeds will be the result of a single act the effects of which continue indefinitely; they will be like a chain going back to that first individual. All those acts will accordingly be brought back to their point of departure.

The Qur'an says:

"On the day of resurrection they will bear the heavy burden of their own sins, as well as that of the sins of those whose ignorance and foolishness they exploited in order to lead them astray. What an evil burden it is they will carry!" (**16:25**).

Imam al-Baqir, upon whom be peace, said:

"Whoever among God's servants established an evil custom among men will be charged with a sin equivalent to the sin of those whom he has led astray, without their sin being diminished in any way." (*Safinat al-Bihar,* Vol. I, p. 674)

Thus a finite action on the part of man may be equivalent to an infinite series of actions.

Not only does every human act leave some trace in the human world; its also leaves a profound imprint, of a specific type, on the world of the unseen. It sets in motion waves of attraction or repulsion; if the act be evil, the entire world of the unseen unites to repel it, and if it be good, to attract it.

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A further error is to imagine that the relationship between an evil act and its punishment is a temporal one. The duration of punishment is commensurate with the quality or the nature of the sin, not with its duration; it is this type of commensurateness which constitutes the real relationship between our acts and requital in the hereafter.

Temporal duration is not at all at issue. Once one understands punishment and requital to be the direct effects of the act itself, it is no longer logical to look for quantitative equality between act and requital.

To illustrate this point let us look at a further example. The external world manifests a kind of reaction to

each of our acts; those who burn in the fire created by their deeds can be said at the same time to be suffering from the consequences of this law. Let us suppose some young man wants to fly in the air. He goes up to the roof of the building where he lives and trying to fly falls to the ground, breaking his spine and becoming paralyzed.

On account of his fantasies, the wretched youth is thus robbed of the use of his legs for the rest of his life and is condemned to pain, misery and deprivation. He indulged his fantasy for only an instant, but the consequences may be as much as fifty years spent sitting confined to his home.

This story of the fateful consequences of falling off a roof illustrates well how the results of our acts rebound upon us. Just as the home becomes a prison for the foolish young man, we also construct prisons for ourselves with our deeds. To use a different metaphor, our acts become like scars on our faces.

Is it contrary to justice that a single moment of neglect and indulgence should be followed by a lifetime of regret, that there should be such a lack of equivalence between the deed and its consequence the irreparable destruction of life? Is there not some contradiction between the outcome of the act and the quantitative finiteness of the act itself?

Let us suppose that the person in our story were to live on not for fifty years but for several thousand years; he would still be burdened for his entire life with the consequences of that one moment's foolishness, and again it could be said that this is unjust.

The connection between an offence and its punishment is therefore not a temporal one, whether in this world or the next.

Even to the penal codes that are enforced in this world, no attention is paid to the temporal or spatial quantity of the crime; it is the type of the crime, the nature of the offence, that is crucial. The number of times the crime has been committed and the period over which it has extended are not regarded as decisive.

Which should receive the greater punishment: a criminal who in one instant blows ten people to pieces by throwing a grenade at them, or someone who listens to frivolous music for ten years?

Someone may blind twenty people or more in a very short time and be sentenced to life imprisonment for doing so; is there any relationship between this offence and its punishment, in terms of duration or quantity? Of course not.

In short, the laws that are enacted among men also do not make any temporal connection between a given crime and its punishment.

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The foregoing discussion has established that a single instance of grave crime, a murder or offence of similar type carries within it innumerable destructive consequences, the ultimate explosion of which will cause man to burn for all eternity.

It is man himself who knowingly and willingly tramples on God's commands, who averts himself from the truth, and who pollutes himself with unbelief, atheism and sin. He creates thereby his own fate and must ineluctably suffer the consequences of his deeds.

The various examples we have cited all have one defect. The causes and reasons that lead to a given result, the way in which a foolish person is caught up in the consequences of his deeds, all this can be understood easily by people. There is nothing remarkable about such situations and they are accounted quite ordinary.

By contrast, the reward and punishment that are dispensed in the hereafter are beyond the scope of our sensory experience; they are subject to doubt and may even be denied. The consequences of deeds as they become manifest in the hereafter are indeed similar to the consequences that can be seen in this world; there is, however, a great disparity in terms of scale and precision.

Our acts and conduct in this world create their own punishment and requital, which remains suspended over our head like a hailstorm until the day of resurrection. We are exclusively responsible for our own acts, because man has the power to decide freely in this life and he cannot regard himself as the mere nuts–and–bolts of society or history.

Once rebellion, corruption and disobedience engulf a person's whole being, so that he expends all his energies on wrongdoing and servitude to the basest desires, he must pay the price for his choice, which is none other than being permanently deprived of God's bounties. This entirely natural and ineluctable fate is not at all irreconcilable with God's justice, for His Essence is utterly pure of any trace of injustice.

The descent of punishment on the rebellious and sinful is nothing other than the natural result of their deeds. Likewise, what the pure and the virtuous come to enjoy is nothing other than the fruit and the effect of their deeds. Through the piety and the veracity they have practiced, they have themselves produced the happiness that they enjoy both in this world and the hereafter. The truth of this is apparent from the famous saying of the Most Noble Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, “This world is the tillage of the hereafter.”

This being the case, what wise person will choose the worse of the two destinies that lie open before him? Man is the shining jewel of creation; he should do nothing to detract from his brilliance by entrusting the control of his being to base desires. The burning desires of the instinctual self will find it easy to dominate completely the hearts and the wills of those who volunteer to serve them. Let us not permit the blinding smoke that arises from our desires to blind the eye of intelligence so that we stumble into the pit of eternal perdition.

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The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, is reported to have said:

“God Almighty will address man as follows on the day of judgement:

“'O Son of Adam! I was sick and you did not visit Me.'

“Then man will reply, 'How might I visit You, seeing that You are the Creator of both worlds?' God will answer, 'Did you not know that such-and-such a servant of Mine fell sick? You did not care enough to visit him; it you had, you would have found Me with him.'

“God will then continue, 'O son of Adam! I asked you for food and you did not feed Me.' Man will reply, `How might I feed You, seeing that You are the Creator of both worlds?' God will answer, `Did you not know that such-and-such a servant of Mine asked you for food? You refused to feed him; if you had fed him, you would have found Me with him.'

“God will then continue, 'O son of Adam! I asked you to give Me water to drink and you refused Me.' Man will reply, 'How might I give You water to drink, seeing that Your power holds the fate of all things in its hand?' God will answer, 'A servant of Mine asked you for water to drink, but you refused him. If you had given him water, you would have found Me with him.” (*al-Wasa'il,* Vol. II, p. 636)

The essential nature of man, in both its corporeal and spiritual dimensions, predisposes him to love and to creative effort. If certain negative impulses cause him to engage in transgression, oppression and harshness, this represents a kind of pathological state in which man has decided to fill himself with corruption and impurity; there is always a way open for him to emerge from this state.

The Qur'an regards it as imperative for man that he should react to sin and rebellion against God with disgust. Thus it proclaims:

“God has made faith beloved of you and adorned it to your hearts, and He has made sin and disbelief ugly and repellent” **(49:7)**.

In order to choose the path of justice and true happiness, to reach the shore of salvation, it is therefore enough to follow the path that our indwelling and essential nature has traced out before us.

Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, says the following concerning the eternal nature of punishment:

“If one group among the people of hellfire is destined to stay there eternally, this is because it was their intention to persist in sin if they were made immortal in this world. Likewise, it the people of paradise are destined to remain there eternally, this is because it was their intention always to obey God and His commands it they were made immortal in this world. The type of eternal existence each group enjoys is therefore determined by its own aims and intentions.” (*Ibid.,* Vol. I, p. 36)

It is true that intention alone is not enough to earn punishment; no one can be punished merely for conceiving a certain intention. At the same time intention is like a key that unlocks the door to man's inner being and permits its contents to be seen.

Once rebellion, evil and wrongdoing reach the level in a person that he decides to sin permanently, so that disbelief engulfs his whole being, the wellsprings of virtue and good dry up within him and all paths leading to salvation and the worship of truth are blocked off.

It should be borne in mind that there is no essential contradiction between enjoying the bounties of this world and those of the hereafter; to enjoy the blessings of this world in a legitimate manner will not lead to deprivation in the hereafter.

The Qur'an says:

"Say, (***O Messenger***) ***`Who has declared forbidden the beautiful gifts of God that He has created for His servants and has prohibited them from consuming clean and pure sustenance?' Say, `These blessings are in this world for the believers, and in the hereafter there will be even purer bounties made available for them.' We set forth Our signs for a people Who have knowledge"*** (**7:32**).

Another verse says:

"Using what God has bestowed upon you, strive to earn reward and bliss in the hereafter. Do not forget your share of this world, and do good, as far as you are able, as God has done good and been generous to you" (**28:77**).

Still another verse says:

"O God, bestow good upon in us in this world and in the hereafter, and preserve us from the torment of hellfire" (**2:201**).

Islam rejects a life spent fruitlessly in abnegation of the world, for no one is permitted to declare illicit the enjoyment of the bounties that God has declared licit.

Naturally, the life of this world must be regarded as the preliminary to the hereafter, as an occasion for earning happiness and good fortune in that realm; God has enjoined good–doing on man in order to enable him to prosper in this world and the hereafter. He further reminds him that all that has been given to him is in the nature of a trust; he should give liberally to other a share of whatever he has, in order to earn God's pleasure thereby.

One of the manifestations of God's favor is that He responds to man's exercise of liberality and generosity with the goods that are ultimately His by bestowing further reward on him.

If people are satisfied with the pleasures and phenomena of this world, God reminds them of the bounties of the hereafter, which are in no way comparable with the pleasures of this world, although they represent their continuation in more desirable form; He warns such people to lessen their attachment to the joys of this world and to aspire instead to those of the next. To miss the opportunities of this world would be to miss the rewards of the hereafter, and thus fall prey to useless regret.

The Commander of the Faithful, `Ali, upon whom be peace, said: "How often does some vile and trivial pleasure prevent man from attaining lofty degree and bar his path to happiness!" (*Ghurar al-Hikam,* p. 550)

What causes a contradiction to arise between this world and the hereafter is exclusive orientation to this world and the choice of it as ultimate goal. A hungry pursuit of this world alone will necessarily deprive man of the lofty states of the hereafter.

Man's infatuation with this world, his slavish devotion to the material joys that it offers, will inevitably alienate him from his true destiny. His intelligence will yield to lack of awareness; he will cease to advance and he will find himself stagnating at a point unworthy of his high station.

The Noble Qur'an warns men not to make this unstable world the object of their worship and their ultimate goal, for it addresses the Noble Prophet of Islam, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, as follows:

"Turn away from those who have turned away from remembrance of Us and have no goal other than the life of this world; that is the extent of their knowledge and awareness" **(53:29)**.

Similarly, another verse of the Qur'an reads:

"They are content with the life of this world, but the life of this World is but slight when compared with the hereafter" **(13:29)**.

Or again:

"They do not look forward in hope to the meeting with Us and are content with the life of this world: they are unaware of Our tokens and signs." **(10:7)**

Islam, then, does not devalue this world; even grants nobility to the activities of man in this world.

The fact that man's gaze should be fixed on the next world as his ideal does not mean that he should have no share of this world.

The Commander of the Faithful, `Ali, upon whom be peace, explained the matter as follows:

"Men fall into two groups with respects to their deeds and their goals.

“The first group work and strive for the sake of this world alone, and pursue no other aim. Their immersion in material concerns prevents them from reflecting on the hereafter, because their thoughts revolve constantly around the world and its enjoyments. Their concern for the future is limited to anxiety for the state of those whom they will leave behind. They give no thought to their own destiny and the hard days that await them, and the days of their life are spent in attempting to provide for those whom they will leave behind.

“The other group have chosen the hereafter as their true aim, and all their efforts are directed to attaining that goal. The world will make itself available to them without their even seeking it, and thus they will attain both this world and the hereafter. When they rise in the morning, they will possess good repute in the eyes of the their Lord, and He will grant them whatever they will request.” (*Nahj al-Balagha,* ed. `Abduh, Vol. IV, p.2)

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