

Why We Suffer:

Islamic Perspectives on Hardship

Lesson 1



tasneeminstitute
ENRICHING THE SOUL

Why We Suffer

- The topic of human suffering is one of the most complex and nuanced discussions in philosophy and religion.
- This question has led some towards God and faith and others towards disbelief and rejection of faith, while leaving the rest in a state of perplexity.

Why We Suffer

- Some of the most pressing questions on this topic include:
- How do we reconcile the indescribable pain and cruelty in the world with the notion of Divine mercy?
- If God is so loving and merciful, why were we not created in paradise?
- Is suffering a sign of God's displeasure?
- Why do some people suffer more than others?
- What are the causes of human suffering?

Defining Suffering

- Human beings can experience three types of pain and suffering:
 - Physical (Body)
 - Emotional (Mind)
 - Spiritual (Soul)
- In this earthly life, physical and emotional pain are inevitable.
- Those who attain nearness to God protect themselves from the suffering of the soul. This is the most painful form of suffering.

Two Key Principles

- Our understanding of human suffering must be predicated on two important theological principles:
 1. Divine justice
 2. The limits of human understanding

Divine Justice

- The Holy Quran in several verses explicitly speaks of God's Justice:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَظْلِمُ النَّاسَ شَيْئًا

“Indeed God does not wrong people in the least.” Quran 10:44

Divine Justice

شَهِدَ اللَّهُ أَنَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُو الْعِلْمِ قَائِمًا بِالْقِسْطِ

“God bears witness that there is no god except Him —and [so do] the angels and those who possess knowledge— maintainer of justice..”

Quran 3:18

Divine Justice

- Injustice stems from three main factors:
 - 1. **Ignorance**: The perpetrator is ignorant of the abhorrent nature of oppression
 - 2. **Need**: The perpetrator is aware of the abhorrent nature of injustice but can only achieve a desired outcome through injustice
 - 3. **Foolishness**: The perpetrator is aware of the abhorrent nature of injustice and is able to achieve a desired outcome without resorting to oppression but still chooses to oppress.

Divine Justice

- Since God is All-Knowing, All-Powerful and All-Wise, none of these three motivations can be attributed to Him.
- Shaykh al-Saduq, the prominent 10th century theologian states:
“The evidence that God does not commit injustice is established by the fact that He is Eternal, Self-Sufficient, All-Knowing and not ignorant. Injustice is only perpetrated by one who is ignorant of its abhorrence or in need of committing it and stands to benefit from it.”

Divine Justice

- Khawajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi, the 13th century theologian writes:

“His Self-Sufficiency and Knowledge confirm the absence of repugnancy in His actions.”

The Limits of Human Understanding

- We need to come to terms with the limitations of human understanding.
- **1. We don't understand the nature of the human spirit**

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

“...and you have been granted very little knowledge.” Quran 17:85

The Limits of Human Understanding

- **2. We only understand “some” aspects of the material world**

يَعْلَمُونَ ظَاهِرًا مِّنَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ عَنِ الْآخِرَةِ هُمْ غَافِلُونَ

“They know some of the outwardly [aspects] of the earthly life and of the hereafter they are heedless.” Quran 30:7

The Limits of Human Understanding

- **3. When we experience marital conflict, we tend to forget that God has placed much goodness in our spouses.**

فَإِنْ كَرِهْتُمُوهُنَّ فَعَسَى أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَيَجْعَلَ اللَّهُ فِيهِ خَيْرًا كَثِيرًا

“For if you dislike them - perhaps you dislike a thing in which God has placed much good.” Quran 4:19

The Limits of Human Understanding

- 4. We don't understand the benefits of fighting in the way of God.

كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْقِتَالُ وَهُوَ كُرْهُ لَكُمْ وَعَسَى أَنْ تُحِبُّوا شَيْئًا
وَهُوَ شَرٌّ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

“Fighting has been enjoined upon you while it is hateful to you. But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And God Knows, while you know not.”

Quran 2:216

The Limits of Human Understanding

- **5. The Story of Musa and Khidr:**
- One of the most important themes of this Quranic story is that one should not judge the actions of a wise person at face value.
- What appears to be unfair, unjust and downright cruel is actually replete with deep wisdom.
 - 1. Khidr makes a hole in a ship belonging to some fisherman
 - 2. Khidr kills a young boy
 - 3. Khidr erects a wall in a village of misers for no compensation.

The Limits of Human Understanding

- To the damaging of the ship, Musa protested:

أَخْرَقْتَهَا لِتُغْرِقَ أَهْلَهَا لَقَدْ جِئْتَ شَيْئًا إِمْرًا

“Did you make a hole in it in order to drown its people? You have done a monstrous thing!” Quran 18:71

The Limits of Human Understanding

- To the killing of the young boy, Musa forcefully objected:

أَقْتَلْتَ نَفْسًا زَكِيَّةً بِغَيْرِ نَفْسٍ لَّقَدْ جِئْتَ شَيْئًا نُكْرًا

“Did you kill a pure soul who had slain no other soul? You have certainly done a terrible thing!” Quran 18:74

The Limits of Human Understanding

- To the repairing of the wall, Musa complained:

قَالَ لَوْ شِئْتَ لَاتَّخَذْتَ عَلَيْهِ أَجْرًا

“Had you wished you could have taken a wage for it.” Quran 18:77

The Limits of Human Understanding

- 1. Khidr explained that his act of damaging the ship was actually a means of saving it, for a tyrannical king was seizing all sound vessels and Khidr's damage to the ship made it undesirable for the king and ultimately saved it for its owners.
- 2. The slaying of the young boy is explained as a means of sparing the parents grief and distress over the rebellion and disbelief he would exhibit later in life
- 3. Khidr explained that the wall was about to fall in a place where the inherited treasure belonging to two orphan boys was buried. By repairing and straightening the wall, Khidr made it possible for the boys to access their treasure when they grew up.

The Limits of Human Understanding

- **6. The Story of Qaroon:** He was a prominent Israelite who rebelled against Moses. He was savvy business with an exorbitant amount of wealth.

يَا لَيْتَ لَنَا مِثْلَ مَا أُوتِيَ قَارُونُ إِنَّهُ لَذُو حَظٍّ عَظِيمٍ

“If only we were given the likes of what Qaroon was given. Truly he is a possessor of great fortune!” Quran 28:79

The Limits of Human Understanding

فَخَسَفْنَا بِهِ وَبِدَارِهِ الْأَرْضَ فَمَا كَانَ لَهُ مِنْ فِئَةٍ يَنْصُرُونَهُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُنْتَصِرِينَ

“Then We caused the earth to engulf him and his house. And he had no party who could help him against God, nor could he help himself.”

Quran 28:81

The Limits of Human Understanding

وَأَصْبَحَ الَّذِينَ تَمَنَّوْا مَكَانَهُ بِالْأَمْسِ يَقُولُونَ وَيَكَانَ اللَّهُ يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَن يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ وَيَقْدِرُ
لَوْلَا أَن مَنَّ اللَّهُ عَلَيْنَا لَخَسَفَ بِنَا وَيَكَانَهُ لَا يُفْلِحُ الْكَافِرُونَ

“And morning found those who had longed to be in his place the day before saying, ‘Alas! It seems God outspreads and straitens provision for whomsoever He will among His servants. Had God not been gracious to us, He would have caused us to be engulfed [as well]. Alas! It seems the disbelievers will not prosper.” Quran 28:82

The Limits of Human Understanding

- **7. Inheritance shares**

آبَاؤُكُمْ وَأَبْنَاؤُكُمْ لَا تَدْرُونَ أَيُّهُمُ أَقْرَبُ لَكُمْ نَفْعًا

“Your parents or your children—you do not know which of them are nearer to you in benefit...” Quran 4:11

Worldly Gifts are Not a Sign of Divine Favor

- In the Quran, God tells us that He has no reservations about giving worldly gifts to people who are not good or even those who disbelieve in Him.
- Indeed, the Quran asserts that if it was not for the believers becoming perplexed and somehow in danger of losing their faith, He would have even given the disbelievers more:

Worldly Gifts are Not a Sign of Divine Favor

وَلَوْلَا أَن يَكُونَ النَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً لَجَعَلْنَا لِمَن يَكْفُرُ بِالرَّحْمَنِ لِبُيُوتِهِمْ سُقُفًا مِّن 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.” Quran 43:33

Worldly Gifts are Not a Sign of Divine Favor

- 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.

Worldly Gifts are Not a Sign of Divine Favor

وَلَا يَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَنَّ مَا نُؤْتِي لَهُمْ خَيْرٌ لِّأَنفُسِهِمْ ۚ إِنَّمَا نُؤْتِي 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...” Quran 3:178

Worldly Gifts are Not a Sign of Divine Favor

- We have traditions about people who did not suffer, who had everything they wanted though they were wrongdoers. In a famous hadith, Imam Sadiq (a) talks about a person who was visited by the Prophet (s).
- 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.

Worldly Gifts are Not a Sign of Divine Favor

قال أبو عبد الله دُعي النبي إلى طعام ، فلما دخل منزل الرجل نظر إلى دجاجة فوق حائط قد باضت ، فتقع البيضة على وتد في حائط فثبتت عليه ولم تسقط ولم تنكسر ، فتعجب النبي منها ، فقال له الرجل : أعجبت من هذه البيضة ؟ .. فوالذي بعثك بالحق ما رُزئت شيئاً قط ،
فنهض

- 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.
- Source: Al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 256