

Chastisement As Explained By The Qur'an

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Al-Mizan, Vol. 5, Under Commentary of Surah 'Aali-'Imran: Verses 1 – 6

In the eyes of the Qur'an, a man who forgets his Lord lives a straitened life – even though in our eyes he may be living most luxuriously. Allah says:

"And whoever turns away from My remembrance, his shall surely be a straitened life..." (20:124).

And it counts even the wealth and the children as chastisements, even though we count them as pleasant blessings:

"And let not their properties and their children excite your admiration; Allah only wishes to chastise them with these in this world and (that) their souls may depart while they are unbelievers" (9:85).

It was described, in short, under the verse: ***"And We said: 'O Adam! dwell you and your wife in the garden'..." (2:35)*** that:

First: Man's joy and sorrow, pleasure and displeasure, attraction and repulsion, enjoyment and suffering, all depend on his views as to what constitutes his good fortune, and what his misfortune.

Second: Comfort and discomfort etc., vary according to the subjects to which they are related. The spirit has its own joy and sorrow; and the body its own comfort and discomfort. Likewise, animal's sense of ease or pain is not on the same level as that of man.

A man having material outlook does not acquire the Divine attributes, and his characteristics do not reflect the light of sublime virtues. Such a man counts the material felicity as the true felicity; in his eyes, spiritual bliss is not a bliss at all. He remains inordinately engrossed in wealth, children, prestige and

worldly power and domination. It is reasonable to suppose that once he gets these things, he would be happy and his bliss would be complete. But reality belies expectation. What he wanted was pure blessing free from every shade of distress. What he got was a pleasure surrounded by a thousand agonies.

When he had not got what he longed for, he was distressed because of deprivation; when he got it, he was grieved because it was very different from what he expected. Each acquirement brought with it a lot of stings; the causes he relied upon failed to bring about the desired effects. And as he had not established any connection with the 'real cause' beyond the apparent causes, he could not find solace in any misery, nor could he get peace of mind in any adversity. Thus, even after getting what he strived for, he remained in despair and desolation.

Such dissatisfaction of man with what he gets spurs him to even farther goals, in the hope of a really blessed future. And the story is repeated again and again. He remains worried before getting his objective; he becomes distressed after getting it.

The Qur'an, on the other hand, teaches us that man is made of two things: a spirit that is eternal, and a body that is subject to changes and deterioration. He remains like this, until he returns to his Lord; then he gets eternity without any change or deterioration. Whatever constitutes the bliss of the spirit, (for example, knowledge) is his real bliss; and whatever is the bliss of the spirit and the body together, like property and children, is also his bliss and felicity – and what a good thing it is! – provided it does not divert his attention from Allah and does not tie him down to materialistic ideas. In the same way, a thing which causes discomfort, or even destruction, to the body, but brings about spiritual blessings, is his blessing (like being killed in the way of Allah, destruction of property in the cause of religion and so on). It is like tolerating, for a moment, the bitter taste of a medicine to secure permanent health.

On the contrary, what brings about a comfort to the body but harms the spirit, is the real suffering of man; it is his chastisement and evil reward. The Qur'an calls the comfort of the body only as a brief enjoyment:

"Let it not deceive you that those who disbelieve go to and fro in the cities [fearlessly]" (3: 196).

"A brief enjoyment! Then their abode is hell, and evil is the resting place" (3: 197).

Also, that which harms the body and spirit both, is called by the Qur'an a chastisement. The unbelievers too call it a chastisement, but their reasoning is different from that of the Qur'an. The Qur'an calls it a chastisement because it harms the spirit; they call it a chastisement, because it harms the body. Look, for example, at various retributions sent down to previous nations. Allah says:

"Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with 'Ad" (89:6).

"The (people of) Iram, possessors of many-columned buildings" (89:7).

“The like of which were not created in the cities” (89:8).

“And (with) Thamud, who hewed out the rocks in the valley” (89:9).

“And (with) Pharaoh, the lord of the stakes” (89: 10).

“Who transgressed in the cities” (89: 11).

“So they made great mischief therein?” (89: 12).

“Therefore, your Lord let fall upon them the whip of chastisement” (89: 13).

“Most surely your Lord is on watch” (89: 14).

The pleasure and displeasure, for sentient things, depend on feeling and perception. We do not count a pleasant thing used by us, as a blessing, if we did not feel it. Likewise, a painful experience is not painful to us if we do not feel its affect.

It shows that what the Qur'an teaches us about the happiness and unhappiness is quite different from material comfort and discomfort. Man, surrounded by material things, needs some especial training to perceive the real happiness as happiness, and the real unhappiness as unhappiness. It is for the purpose of this training, that the Qur'an asks its people not to attach their hearts to other than Allah; to realize that their Lord is the Real Owner Who owns everything; everything depends on Him; nothing should be obtained but for His sake.

A man having this outlook will always find in this world unlimited sources of happiness: either the bliss of spirit and body together, or that of the spirit only. Other things, he will count as misfortune and as sources of unhappiness.

But a man who is entangled in worldly pleasure and material comfort, thinks, at least in the beginning, that what he has acquired of the trinkets of this world is a blessing and good fortune for him, that it is the root of his happiness. But soon he realizes that he is wandering aimlessly in a desert full of dangerous beasts, poisonous snakes and tormenting scorpions. What he thought to be his good fortune turns into greatest misfortune. Allah says:

“Therefore, leave them to go on with [false] discourses and sport until they come face to face with that day of theirs which they are promised” (70:42).

“Certainly, you were heedless of it; but now We have removed from you your veil, so your sight today is sharp” (50:22).

“Therefore, turn aside from him who turns his back upon Our reminder and does not dec 're anything but this world's life” (53:29).

“That is the [last] reach of the knowledge...” (53:30).

Whatever pleasure they get is contaminated with a lot of worry and distress.

This leads us to believe that the perception and thinking found in the people of Allah and the Qur'an, are quite different from those of other people, although both groups are human beings. And between the two extremes there are countless ranks of those believers who have not yet perfected their divine character.

This, in short, is the chastisement, as explained by the Qur'an. Of course, the Qur'an uses the word torment or chastisement for bodily discomfort and pain also. But it counts it as the discomfort of body, unrelated to the real, that is, spiritual chastisement. Allah quotes Ayyub ('a) as saying:

“The Satan has affected me with toil and torment [‘adhab, 38:41]” [عذاب].

Also He says:

“And when We delivered you from Pharaoh’s people who subjected you to severe punishment [su'a 'l-‘adhab, سُوْءَ الْعَذَابِ], killing your sons and sparing your women, and in this there was a great trial from your Lord” (7: 141).

Note how Allah calls what they were subjected to as a trial and test from Allah, but a torment in itself – not from Allah.

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