

Sustenance In The Qur'an

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Al-Mizan, Vol. 5, Under Commentary of Surah 'Aali-'Imran: Verses 26 – 27

ar-Rizq (الرِّزْقُ), usually translated as sustenance, maintenance, or means of livelihood, is a well-known concept. A glance at its various usages shows that the word has a connotation of bestowal by someone to someone else, for example, the sustenance given by the king to the soldiers. Originally, it was used for only the foodstuff. For example, Allah says:

“And their maintenance and their clothing must be borne by the father according to usage” (2:233).

Mark that the clothing has not been counted as a part of the maintenance. Thereafter, the meaning was extended to include every foodstuff, even if the giver was not known – in any case, it was a bestowal of good luck. The process of generalization continued, and now it is used for every useful thing – food or something else – which comes to someone; it includes all the paraphernalia of life, like: wealth, prestige, family, supporters, beauty, knowledge and so on. Allah says:

“Or is it that you ask them a recompense? But the recompense of your Lord is best, and He is the best of those who provide sustenance” (23:72).

Also, He quotes Shu‘ayb (‘a) as saying:

“O my people! have you considered if I have a clear proof from my Lord and He has given me a goodly sustenance from Himself...” (11:88).

Here the sustenance refers to the prophethood and the Divine knowledge etc.

Allah says:

“Surely Allah, He is the Bestower of sustenance, the Lord of Power, the Strong” (51:58).

The context confines the bestowal of sustenance to Allah only. The verse leads us to the following concepts:

First: Bestowal of sustenance, in reality, cannot be ascribed to any one other than Allah. Of course, there are some verses that attribute it to others also; for example:

“And Allah is the Best of sustainers” (62: 11).

(There are many sustainers, but Allah is the Best.) Also, He gives the order:

“...and maintain them out of it, and clothe them” (4:5).

But such usages do not give them any independent status; the only Sustainer is Allah, others are just a means of conveying Allah’s gift to His servants. It is not different from the Kingdom and the Might which actually belong to Allah, although others too get them by Allah’s bestowal and permission.

Second: Whatever good the people get and which they make use of, and derive benefit from, in their existence, is their sustenance; and it is Allah Who bestows it to them. There is a large number of the verses of sustenance to prove this fact. In addition, there are numerous verses on the theme of creation, management, decree, possession, will, and good, which prove that all these things belong exclusively to Allah – and giving sustenance is interwoven with these factors.

Third: Suppose a man takes advantage of a certain thing to obtain an unlawful benefit. Inasmuch as it was the cause or means of a sin, it would not be attributed to Allah. Allah has clearly said that on the level of legislation, He does not sanction any sin or evil. He says:

“And when they commit an indecency, they say: ‘We found our fathers doing this, and Allah has enjoined it on us.’ Say: ‘Surely Allah does not enjoin indecency; do you say against Allah what you do not know?’” (7:28).

Also, He says:

“Surely Allah enjoins the doing of justice and the doing of good [to others] and the giving to the kindred, and He forbids indecency and evil and rebellion...” (16:90).

It is just unimaginable that He would forbid a thing and then, at the same time, would allow it; or that He would declare something unlawful and then confine a servant’s sustenance to it! And unlawful benefit is not “sustenance” on the level of legislation. Nevertheless, it is “sustenance” on the level of creation. The religious responsibility does not reach up to the level of creation – and there is nothing bad on that level. When the Qur’an says that Allah gives sustenance to every body, it looks at this subject from the level of creation.

A Divine talk cannot be reduced to the level of the simpletons' understanding; in other words, it cannot overlook the deep Divine realities just because they are beyond the mental capacity of common man. The Holy Book contains what is a healing for the believers' hearts; nobody may fall into perdition by it except the unjust:

“And We reveal of the Qur’an that which is a healing and a mercy to the believers, and it adds only to the perdition of the unjust” (17:82).

Moreover, there are verses showing that it was Allah Who gave kingdom to Namrud (Nimrod), Pharaoh and others like them, and bestowed wealth and treasures to Qarun and his like. They got all these things not without the permission of Allah; He gave them the kingdom and wealth as a means of trial, to test their spiritual condition, and to complete His proof against them; it was as though Allah left them to go astray if they so wished, and gave them enough rope to hang themselves.

It should be noted here that, in the above examples, we took those cases to the level of legislation and yet found good explanations for them that would satisfy the reason and were not against the sublime Divine Justice. If such things are unobjectionable at the level of legislation, certainly there can be no objection in providing sustenance, at the level of creation – even if it be “unlawful” for legislation’s point of view.

Allah has said that every thing has been created by Him, is sent down by Him from His treasures of mercy:

“And there is not a thing but with Us are the treasures of it, and We do not send it down but in a known measure” (15:21).

Further, He has said:

“And whatever is with Allah is better...” (28:60).

These two (and other similar) verses read together prove that whatever a man gets in this life, it comes from Allah and is good and beneficial for him. This theme may also be inferred from the verse:

“Who made good every thing that He has created...” (32:7),

Read in conjunction with the verse:

“That is Allah, your Lord, the Creator of every thing; there is no god but He” (40:62).

Yet, there is no denying that some Divine gifts appear to be evil and harmful to the recipient. But its evil and harm is just relative; it may be so for this particular person, while it brings good and benefit to a great many people; in other words, that personal hardship may be good, in the wider context of the world-system. Or it could have been misused by the man himself. Allah points to this factor when He

says:

“And whatever misfortune befalls you, it is from yourself” (4:79).

However, we have already dealt with this subject in a previous volume.

In short, whatever good Allah bestows on His creatures (and all that He bestows is good and beneficial), it is called sustenance, in its literal sense: it is a gift that benefits the recipient. Probably, it is this theme that the following verse points at:

“And the sustenance [given] by your Lord is better...” (20: 131).

The above discourse shows that, for almost all practical purposes, the three concepts – sustenance, good and creation – are one and the same. Every sustenance is good and created; and every creation is a sustenance and good. Nevertheless, there is a fine difference between sustenance and good on one side and creation on the other.

Sustenance presupposes the existence of something to be sustained, to whom the sustenance would be given. Food is sustenance for the digestive system because it needs that food; the digestive system is sustenance for the man as he needs it; that man is sustenance for his parents because they benefit from him; likewise, the existence is a sustenance for the man, per se. Allah says:

“... Who gave to everything its creation...” (20:50).

Likewise, good presupposes a selector who would choose what he wants from among a lot of things. Food is good for the digestive system because it needs it, and opts for it when given a choice; the digestive system is, in the same way, good for the man, and similarly the existence is good for him.

But as for creation, it does not require any actual or imaginary pre-existing thing. Food, digestive system, man, every thing is created in its own right; it by itself is the object of creation; it does not need any other object.

Every sustenance belongs to Allah; every good belongs to Allah. Whatever sustenance comes from Him, whatever good is given by Him, it is given gratis, not in exchange of or return for anything. Suppose you wanted to give to Allah something as price of the sustenance; well, what could you give Him? Whatever you may think of, it already belongs to Allah; you have no right whatsoever on any thing. It is just a mercy of Allah that He has undertaken to give sustenance to every one, and has made it obligatory for Himself to sustain all the creatures; He says:

“And there is no animal in the earth but on Allah is the sustenance of it” (11:6).

“And in the heaven is your sustenance and what you are threatened with” (51:22).

“And by the Lord of the heavens and the earth! it is most surely the truth, just as you do speak

(51:23).

It shows that although sustenance is a right on Allah – because He Himself has undertaken to give sustenance to everyone – yet it is in fact a free gift from Him, because no creature is in his own right entitled to get it.

The above talk makes one thing clear: Even if a man obtains his sustenance unlawfully, originally, he was allotted a lawful sustenance. It is unimaginable that Allah would undertake to give sustenance to a man, then compel him to get it through unlawful means; and then would tell him not to use it, and punish him if he disobeyed.

Let us explain it in another way: Sustenance is a Divine gift containing good; as such it is a Divine mercy for all the creatures. We have already mentioned that there are two kinds of mercy: There is a general mercy which covers all the servants, believers and unbelievers, pious ones and sinners alike; and it is not confined to the human beings, it encompasses other creatures too. And there is a special mercy, the one that is reserved for the walkers on the path of felicity and righteousness, for example, true belief, piety and ultimately the paradise. Likewise, there are two kinds of sustenance: A general sustenance which is provided to every thing for its protection and survival; and a special sustenance which remains within the limits of legality.

The general mercy as well as the general sustenance is foreordained and measured; Allah says:

“And Who created every thing, then ordained for it a measure (25:2).

Likewise, the special mercy and the special sustenance are foreordained and measured. For example, guidance is a special mercy; and on the level of legislation, it is foreordained and decreed for every man, be he a believer or an unbeliever. That is why Allah raised the prophets and sent down the books. He says:

“And I did not create the jinn and the human beings except that they should worship Me” (51:56).

“I do not desire from them any sustenance and I do not desire that they should feed Me” (51:57).

“Surely Allah, He is the Bestower of sustenance, the Lord of power, the Strong (51:58).

Also, He says:

“And your Lord has commanded (decreed) that you shall not worship (any) but Him...” (17:23).

It means that worship (which depends on guidance and is one of its concomitants) is a decreed measure – on the level of legislation. And so is the special sustenance (which is obtained lawfully), on the same level. Allah says:

“They are lost indeed who kill their children foolishly without knowledge, and forbid what Allah

has given to them, forging a lie against Allah; they have indeed gone astray, and they are not the followers of the right course” (6: 140).

Also, He says:

“And Allah has made some of you excel others in the means of subsistence, so those who are made to excel do not give away their sustenance to those whom their right hands possess, so that they should be equal therein...” (16:71).

These two verses are unconditional and general; they cover the believers as well as the unbelievers, and include the one who obtains his sustenance in lawful way as well as the one who does so unlawfully.

One more thing: As was explained in the beginning, sustenance is the gift or bestowal which the sustained benefits from. It follows that only that much of it can be truly called sustenance which is used up by the sustained. A man has been given a lot of wealth, but he eats only a small portion of it; therefore, his sustenance, strictly speaking, is the portion he ate up; the remainder cannot be called his sustenance except in the sense that he was given it. In other words, when we say, Zayd has got ample (or little) sustenance, it does not necessarily mean that he has got a lot of (or little) wealth.

There are some other aspects of this topic, which we shall write about under the verse:

“And there is no animal in the earth but on Allah is the sustenance of it, and He knows its resting place and its depository; all (things) are in a manifest book” (11:6).

Now we come back to the clause under discussion, that is, ***“and Thou givest sustenance to whom thou pleasest, without measure”***. The sustenance is “without measure” because Allah gives it to the creatures gratis, and they by themselves have got no right to it. Whatever they could offer in exchange, even their requests, invocations and thanks, in reality belongs to Allah, they have got nothing of their own to offer in consideration of the sustenance. Therefore, there is no measure for the sustenance given by Allah.

Clearly, the clause does not imply that the given sustenance is unlimited and unmeasured. How can it be when the verses of “measure” clearly refute it? For example, Allah says:

“Surely, We created every thing according to a measure” (54:49).

“And whoever fears Allah, He will make for him an outlet” (65:2).

“And give him sustenance from whence he thinks not; and whoever trusts in Allah, He is sufficient for him; surely Allah attains His purpose; Allah indeed has made a measure for every thing” (65:3).

Sustenance, therefore, is a free gift from Allah, yet it is measured according to the pleasure of Allah.

The two verses together make the following concepts clear:

First: The possession as well as the Kingdom exclusively belongs to Allah.

Second: Every good is in His hand, and comes from Him.

Third: Sustenance is a gift from Allah, without any recompense or exchange.

Fourth: Kingdom, might, honour, and every single conventional good, occurring in the social framework, (like: wealth, prestige, power, etc.) are various aspects of the sustenance, given by Allah to His servants.

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