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Al-Islam.org

Message of Thaqaalayn Vol. 18, no. 1, Spring 2017

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Publisher(s):

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Abstract

This article discusses the Qur'anic verses that describe our purpose in life, the objective we should be seeking, and how we should attain it. The verses reveal that the purpose for which we were created is a benefit that accrues to us, and that, without a hereafter, our existence would be vain. Therefore, we are in a journey, destined for eternity, and our goal is to reach everlasting bliss. Obtaining such a goal requires training and self-realisation: These can be achieved by constant servitude toward God as we go through tests and trials in this life.

Whose Purpose?

We sometimes ask ourselves, What was God's purpose in creation, and why did He create us and the universe? We ask these questions because of a latent assumption: rational beings seek goals for what they do; their voluntary actions are not without a purpose and objective. This assumption, however, is only applicable to limited beings. We are limited in two ways:

1. We have a limited share of resources, such as health, power, and wealth.
2. We have a shortage many goods, benefits, and pleasures that we desire.

A necessary consequence of scarcity of resources is that anything that we do becomes a sacrifice because it involves using limited resources that could have otherwise been retained or used for some other purpose (a.k.a 'opportunity cost'). Therefore, a wise person will not decide unless it has the greatest benefit for him or her when compared to other alternatives. The second aspect of limitation only reinforces this, because if we were perfect, infinite beings who did not lack anything and were not

subject to any loss, then we would not have to worry about the loss or mismanagement of resources even if they were limited. Neither of the two kinds of limitations applies to God, however.

Because God is a perfect being (i.e. infinite, unlimited) it is not inconceivable to talk about Him acquiring any good or perfection since He is absolute good and ultimate perfection; He does not lack in good or perfection for Him to seek it through an action, such as creation. Therefore, His actions are not the causes of His perfections; rather, they are effects of His perfections. This idea is also found in other traditions such as Hinduism: "The Supreme has nothing to do, but because He is omnipotent, everything is performed by Him naturally, as if done automatically." [1](#)

Other beings live to achieve perfection continue to pursue this path as long as they have not reached absolute perfection. God, however, does not seek to reach an objective through His creatures; rather, He is Himself the ultimate objective of all beings. To illustrate, consider the sun that shines, not to gain something, but rather, because it is in its nature to do so, or a spring that naturally gushes water and the ocean waves. (These examples are, of course, imperfect, as is every example for the Absolute.)

Likewise, it is God's perfection that is the cause for His actions: His qualities and attributes necessitate the occurrence of certain events. This, however, does not contradict the fact that His actions have some purpose. God Himself is without purpose because He is the purpose; however, based on His wisdom, His actions follow a purpose according. Thus, if we define purpose to be the acquirement of some perfection that was not there before, then the 'purpose of creation' would not refer to any perfection to God; instead, it refers to a perfection that accrues to His creatures.[2](#)

[A Qur'anic Synopsis](#)

The following are verses in the Qur'an that talk about the purpose of creation:

- 1. It is Allah who has created seven heavens, and of the earth [a number] similar to them. The command gradually descends through them, that you may know that Allah has power over all things, and that Allah comprehends all things in knowledge (65:12).***
- 2. He, who created death and life that He may test you [to see] which of you is best in conduct. And He is the All mighty, the All-forgiving (67:2).***
- 3. I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may serve Me (51:56).***
- 4. Had your Lord wished, He would have made mankind one community; but they continue to differ, except those on whom your Lord has mercy - and that is why He created them - and the word of your Lord has been fulfilled: 'I will surely fill hell with jinn and humans, all together!' (11:118-119).***

The first verse is about the creation and direction of the universe. The magnificent creation of the

heavens and the earth, as well as the orderly direction of their affairs, is intended to raise our level of knowledge, awareness and consciousness about God's absolute power and knowledge. The second verse – specifically concerning mankind – is about the temporary nature of our existence in this world and the vicissitudes that we go through in life, which are intended to test our faith and behaviour. This is an inseparable element of life in this world as repeatedly emphasised in the Qur'an. See 2:155, 9:126, 18:7, 29:2–3, 47:31. The third verse is the most famous and the most commonly–quoted verse regarding the purpose of creation. It says that our role in creation is to serve and worship God. The fourth set of verses shows the result of this worship: qualifying for God's mercy.

Worship And Servitude

One subtlety found in 51:56 is that it does not say, 'I created the jinn and the humans to serve Me' but it says, 'I did not create the jinn and humans except to serve Me.' Had it been the former, it would have sufficed for us to serve God once, once a while, or overall in our life. However, the verse is more precise and can be broken down into two statements: (a) I created the jinn and the humans to serve Me; and (b) I did not create the jinn and the humans for anything else. In other words, we have been created to worship and nothing else. It thus follows that every breath and every step that we take should be in God's service and worship. Otherwise we are not fulfilling the purpose for which we are created, thus failing to reach perfection.

This is why God says in the next verse, verse fifty–eight: "I desire no provision from them, nor do I desire that they should feed Me." The first part of this verse is about seeking provision for oneself, and the second part about feeding God. This dichotomy is seen again and confirmed in the following verse:

"Indeed it is Allah who is the All provider, Powerful, All-strong" (51:1)

What God means when He says, "I desire no provision from them" is that I have not charged them with providing for themselves; they have not been created for the objective of hunting for food, seeking sustenance, and earning a livelihood – that is not the purpose of their creation. Rather, "Indeed it is Allah who is the All-provider." Furthermore, I have not created them so that they may benefit me in any way – "feeding" being a clear example for benefit – because ***"I am the Powerful, All strong" (51:58)***.

These two verses show that the desired worship mentioned in verse fifty–six is for our own good and not in any way for the benefit of God. He is independent of our worship, but we are in need of serving Him.

As Rumi, the Persian poet, wrote,

"My creation was a case

Of mercy and grace.

It was not to attain

Some benefit or gain.³

Godwariness, Felicity And Mercy

The service and worship mentioned in these verses is not our ultimate goal but a means to something else. Worshipping God is an intermediate stage toward achieving Godwariness (taqwa):

O mankind! Worship your Lord, who created you and those who were before you, so that you may be Godwary (2:21).

Indeed, God's most universal and fundamental covenant and injunction of God is "***so that you may be Godwary***" (See 2:63, 6:153, 7:171), a specific case of which is seen in the verse about fasting (2:183) and an equivalent idea is mentioned about prayer (29:45). The Qur'an identifies felicity to be the outcome of Godwariness: "***Be wary of Allah, so that you may be felicitous.***" See 2:189, 3:130, 3:200, 5:35, 5:100). Therefore, the ultimate objective in worshipping God is to achieve felicity and eternal happiness. This is seen more directly in the following verse: "***O you who have faith! Bow down and prostrate yourselves, and worship your Lord, and do good, so that you may be felicitous***" (22:77).

Worship denotes the movement and advancement of the created toward the Creator.⁴ In other words, God has created the universe so that it may move toward absolute perfection, and absolute perfection is nothing but God Himself. This idea – that all beings are on a journey toward God – is found repeatedly in the Qur'an: "***Toward Us is the destination***" (50:43). Among beings are those whose movement is through voluntary action and free will; they have such nature and structure that their growth lies in worship in a context of test and trial, the result of which will be felicity and God's mercy, as seen in the above-mentioned verses.

The Hadith Of Hidden Treasure

Many exegetes have interpreted the Qur'anic phrase "***Except that they may serve Me***" (51:56) to mean 'that they may know Me' (li ya 'rifuni).⁵ There is a widely narrated sacred tradition (al-hadith alqudsi) in which God says, 'I was a hidden treasure. I liked to be known, so I created the creation so that I may be known.'⁶ A few notes about this hadith and discussion:

- The Qur'anic equivalent of this idea is in: "***It is Allah who has created seven heavens, and of the earth [a number] similar to them. The command gradually descends through them, that you may know that Allah has power over all things, and that Allah comprehends all things in knowledge.***" (65:12) Given this verse and our discussion above, God's love for being known is also a benefit, change, and perfection for His creatures, and not for Himself.
- What is reported above as a sacred tradition is not found in any Shi'a or Sunni authority of hadith. It can at best be taken as a result of some spiritual vision, unveiling or realisation by a mystic.

- Even though there is Qur'anic evidence to support the meaning being conveyed in this narration, it does not justify the forging of a narrations and its ascription to God under any circumstances. The Qur'an has repeatedly emphasised: *Who is a greater wrongdoer than him who fabricates a lie against Allah?* (6:21, 6:93, 6: 144, 7:37, 10: 17, 11:18, 18: 15, 29:68, 39:32, 61:7).

- The word for 'hidden' in this narration is makhfi, which is evidence to the fabrication of this narration. Given the terminology of the Qur'an and Sunnah, the word should have been khafi, not makhfi. The latter is used for 'hidden' in Persian, which can show the origin of the forger.

- Knowledge is both a prerequisite and consequence of worship. It is a prerequisite because of the central role of intention in acts of obedience; one essentially worships his or her own understanding and mental construct of God. However, an overall knowledge and belief in God is enough for one to begin worshipping God. Consequently, worshipping leads to a higher realisation and in-depth knowledge of God. This is particularly seen in hadith of 'Unwan al-Basri where Imam al-Sadiq ('a) advises Unwan: 'If you want knowledge you should first seek out the reality of servitude in yourself, and seek knowledge through practice.'⁷ It is also important to clarify what the term knowledge ('ilm) means in religious texts.

Summary

We were not created in vain, and our life in this world is one stage in our journey toward eternal life (3: 191, 21:16, 23: 115, 44:38-39, 75:36).

"We certainly created man in the best of forms (95:4)" but then ***"We relegated him to the lowest of the low (95:5)"***. The reason for these ups and downs is

"We make such vicissitudes rotate among mankind, so that Allah may ascertain those who have faith, and that He may take martyrs {or witnesses} from among you, and Allah does not like the wrongdoers" (3: 140).

Sometimes You take me to a garden to rest;
Sometimes You burn me with Your trial and test;
Either way You are leading me to light,
So that my eyes may open and attest.⁸

Free will and the dilemma that we face between good and evil are what distinguish us from other creatures. Because of this makeup, our perfection lies in building and training ourselves such that we choose that which is good and are not tempted by that which is evil. This world is a realm of constant change, and each of us experience a variety of events and conditions in life. The purpose of all of this is that we develop in ourselves the firmness and determination to continuously revolve around a single axis: our Lord. This is what is meant by the verse:

I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may serve Me (51:56).

This world is a paddock where we are trained for competition day. We have a long journey ahead of us and the best provision that we can take with us on this journey is Godwariness –*taqwa* (2: 197).

We are heading for the home of love with persistence;
We've come from the border of nonbeing to existence.
We've left the green garden of Paradise to seek
The green line that we saw on Thy Face and Cheek.⁹

We used to be with the angels in their dome;
We shall go back to heaven for that is our home.
Rather we are beyond the angels and heaven;
His glory is our home which is above the seven.
Your essence is pure, divine and mild;
But the realm of dust is mixed and defiled;
So why did you settle somewhere so low?
What is this place? Pack up and go!¹⁰

- ^{1.} Bhakti Vedanta Swami Prabhupada, commentary under Srimad Bhagavatam, 1.3.35.
- ^{2.} Tasnim, 28/244 and 28/318–319, with some elaboration.
- ^{3.} Rumi, Mathnawi, vol. 2, line 1760.
- ^{4.} Tasnim, 28/321.
- ^{5.} Ibn Kathir, 7/396, narrated from Ibn Jurayj. Muhit, 9/562, narrated from Mujahid. Abu al Sa'ud, Tafsir Ab 1al–Sa 'ud, 2/130.
- ^{6.} Razi, 28/194. Abu al–Sa'ud, Tafsir Abu al–Sa 'ud, 2/130.
- ^{7.} Tabrizi, 'Ali ibn al–Hasan, Mishkat al–Anwar, 325–328. Bihar, 1/224–226.
- ^{8.} Rumi, Divan–i–Kabir, ghazal 1786.
- ^{9.} Hafiz, ghazal 366.
- ^{10.} Rumi, Divan–i–Kabir, ghazal 463.

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