

A Reconciliation of Divine Blessings and Divine Punishment

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Question

How can the verses of the Quran and the *ahadith* which speak about the Divine Blessings and Divine Tribulations be reconciled?

In some of the *ahadith*, [a general theme] has been stated that: “أَبْلَاءُ الْوَلَاءِ” – meaning that tribulations will inevitably come upon those who have a firm allegiance (to Allah, the Prophet and the Ahlul Bayt).

In addition to this, it has been narrated that Imam ‘Ali said: “*Tribulations reach our followers quicker than floods reach the valleys.*”¹

Imam Musa b. Ja’far al-Kazim has said: “*A believer is like the two balances in a [manual] scale – the more their faith grows, the more their examinations and afflictions will increase.*”² There are many *ahadith* in this regard.

On the other hand, the Quran says:

وَلَوْ أَنَّ أَهْلَ الْقُرَىٰ آمَنُوا وَأَنفَقُوا لَفَتَحْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ بَرَكَاتٍ مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَكِنْ كَذَّبُوا فَأَخْذَنَاهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ

And if the people of the towns had believed and guarded (against evil) We would certainly have opened up for them blessings from the heaven and the earth, but they rejected, so We overtook them for what they had earned. (7:96)

In addition to all of this, Imam Ja’far b. Muhammad al-Sadiq said to Ibn Jundab:

*If our Shi'a are stable and unwavering [in their faith], then the angels will shake their hands; the clouds will shadow them; in the daytime, they will benefit from the light of the sun (and it would rain at night to give them the nourishment that they need); the crops will grow from beneath their feet in abundance; and they will be given whatever they want.*³

How can we reconcile these two categories of verses of the Quran and *ahadith* and resolve the ‘apparent’ contradiction? Basically, how do we understand these two groupings of seemingly divergent beliefs – Divine Blessings and Divine Punishments?

Answer

These verses of the Quran and the *ahadith* refer to two categories of the ‘immutable constants of Allah’s system’ [also known as the *Sunnatullah*] that at first sight seem to conflict with one another, so we must first examine each of these beliefs and then answer the question of whether these two methodologies of the ‘immutable constants of Allah’s system’ actually do conflict with one another or not.

A. The ‘Immutable Constants of Allah’s System’ (*Sunnatullah*) in Guiding Humanity

Allah’s dominance over the world is not such that He acts directly and disrupts the system of the universe to prove His authority, but rather Allah governs over the world through His established ‘immutable constants’, and in this way, everything is actually dominated by Allah.

These ‘immutable constants’ are diverse and may not be completely recognizable to us, however some of them are mentioned in the verses of the Quran and the *ahadith*.

Some of them which concern the guidance of humanity have been articulated in Surah al-A’raf (chapter 7 of the Noble Quran) where Allah says:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِي قَرْيَةٍ إِلَّا أَخْذَنَا أَهْلَهَا بِالْبُلْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَاءِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَضَرَّعُونَ

And We did not send a prophet in a town, but We overtook its people with distress and affliction in order that they might humble themselves. (7:94)

ثُمَّ بَدَّلْنَا مَكَانَ السَّيِّئَةِ الْحَسَنَةَ حَتَّىٰ عَفَوْا وَقَالُوا قَدْ مَسَّ أَبَاءَنَا الضَّرَاءُ وَالسَّرَّاءُ فَأَخْذَنَاهُمْ بَغْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ

Then We gave them good in the place of evil until they became many and said: Distress and happiness did indeed befall our fathers. Then We took them by surprise while they did not perceive. (7:95)

وَلَوْ أَنَّ أَهْلَ الْقُرَىٰ آمَنُوا وَأَتَقْوَا لَفَتَحْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ بَرَكَاتٍ مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَكِنْ كَذَّبُوا فَأَخْذَنَاهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ

And if the people of the towns had believed and guarded (against evil) We would certainly have opened up for them blessings from the heaven and the earth, but they rejected, so We overtook them for what they had earned. (7:96)

أَفَمِنْ أَهْلِ الْقُرَىٰ أَنْ يَأْتِيهِمْ بِأُسْنَانَ بَيَانًا وَهُمْ نَاجِمُونَ

What! do the people of the towns then feel secure from Our punishment coming to them by night while they sleep? (7:97)

أَفَمِنْ أَهْلِ الْقُرَىٰ أَنْ يَأْتِيهِمْ بِأُسْنَانَ ضُحَىٰ وَهُمْ يَلْعَبُونَ

What! do the people of the towns feel secure from Our punishment coming to them in the morning while they play? (7:98)

أَفَمِنْ أَهْلِ الْقُرَىٰ أَنْ يَأْمَنُ مَكْرَ اللَّهِ فَلَا يَأْمَنُ مَكْرَ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ

What! do they then feel secure from Allah’s plan? But none feels secure from Allah’s plan except

the people who shall perish. (7:99)

أَوَلَمْ يَهْدِ لِلَّذِينَ يَرِثُونَ الْأَرْضَ مِنْ بَعْدِ أَهْلِهَا أَنَّ لَوْ شَاءَ أَصْبَنَاهُمْ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ ۝ وَنَطْبِعُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ

Is it not clear to those who inherit the earth after its (former) residents that if We please, We would afflict them on account of their faults and set a seal on their hearts so they would not hear. (7: 100)

What is mentioned in this group of verses can be summarized in the following points:

1. Whenever people are called to faith (iman), Allah will first inflict them with difficulty and suffering, so that they may revert to Allah with anguish and humility.
2. If these hardships do not soften their hearts, then Allah will turn these difficulties into pleasures and enjoyable things, and thereby spiritual negligence (*ghaflah*) and forgetfulness of Him will take them over such that they will remain in their past ways of spiritual misguideness, and then He will torment them. This is known as the ‘Divine Practice of Reprieve’ (*imhal*) and the ‘Divine Practice of Gradual Punishment’ (*istidraj*).
3. If those people eventually believe and the difficulties that they faced end up bringing them closer to Allah, then He will send down His blessings from the skies and from within the earth for them.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Allah tests His servants, and if they come out of these trials successfully, then He will send them His blessings. However, it must be noted that one must never assume that if someone believes in Allah, that He will leave that believer untested.

B. Close Association of Divine Blessings with Human Actions

In general, all components of the universe – just like the organs and all of the parts of the human body are interconnected and linked to one another, in such a way that the endurance of one organ has an effect on the issuance of the actions of other organs, and this interaction in the properties and works is present in all areas of the universe.

These components – in the way that the Noble Quran has explained them – are all moving towards Allah, the Gracious, and the purpose which Allah has ordained for them.

The deviation and disruption in the movement of even one component of these multiple components [of the universe], especially if it is an important component, will inevitably result in a harmful effect on all of the other components. Thus, the impact which other components of the universe that are interconnected with this one will face – will also be contaminated.

Therefore, the corruption of that initial component – which we mentioned in the beginning – will

eventually come back full circle and affect its own self. At the same time, it is possible that either by its own self or with the help of other components which it had previously acquired endurance from, it may also return back to its original state that it was in before its diversion and deviation.

However, if it continues to deviate and distort, then its corruption will continue to be present and its affliction will continue until its diversion reaches a critical stage, and it will attempt to pull its other components to destruction with it.

It is at this point that all of the components of the world will rise against it, and through the power which they have been endowed by Allah which they used to protect their sanctity, they will continue to fight against that component until it is completely annihilated.

In summary, this is one of the ‘immutable constants’ which the Almighty Allah has created in all segments of the world – one of which is the human being.

This ‘immutable constant’ is not something which can be transgressed, nor is the human being excluded from it, and since this is the reality of creation and existence, if for example a nation on Earth was to divert from the path of human nature (*fitrah*) and remain away from the path of human happiness which Allah has set for it, then the natural environment – which is both where it exists and from where it originates from – will also be disturbed, and thus the harmful effects of this disorder will go back to the community itself.

In summary, the smoke of their distortions will go back into their own eyes; for it was that individual oneself that with their own distortion, retained the negative effects of one’s actions in the natural world. It is clear that in the return for those effects, both the disturbances and the differences will affect their society!⁴

The destruction of ethics and hardness of the spiritual heart; the loss of affection amongst the members of a society; the flood of tribulations and trials, and many other things threaten the very existence of the creations and may lead to their eventual extermination.

The skies will not send their seasonal rains, and the earth will not bring forth its produce; trees will not grow and instead, the people will be plagued with off-seasonal rains, floods, storms, lightning strikes, and the earth will dig into them with her earthquakes and desolation.

These are all of the Divine signs (*ayatullah*) that should make a recalcitrant community repent and turn back to the straight path of the intrinsic human nature (*fitrah*) – and in fact it is a show of difficulty (*zurzur*) after ease (*yusr*).

This ‘immutable constant’ is also seen on the opposite side – meaning that if the people of a nation believe and show piety, then the Divine blessings will be showered upon them.⁵

The Tribulations and Severe Exams of the Believers

There are verses of the Quran and various *ahadith* which refer to the exams and tribulations which will affect the believers – two of which are in the question (which we seek to answer).

In the books of *ahadith*, there are entire chapters devoted to this same theme and if we look at the lives of the prophets and the infallibles, we will see this ‘immutable constant’ present in their lives as well.

The prophets faced the worst misfortunes; and the lives of the infallible Imams were also accompanied by untold hardships such as imprisonment, torture and martyrdom. Of course, these hardships can have some of the following rationale:

1. Strengthening the will and fortification of their souls, expanding their existential beings and strengthening their ontological mastership (*wilayah takwini*).⁶
2. Elevation of their degrees in the stages of the hereafter.
3. Giving them a greater abhorrence for the transient world and its after-effects, and a greater desire for the life of the Hereafter and what is offered to them by Allah.
4. An increased display of humility and asking from Allah and remembrance of Him, and the acquisition of the provisions needed for the journey of the hereafter. Of course, the friends of Allah (*awliya*) themselves welcome such difficulties with satisfaction and are thankful for these challenges; and as these adversities come in their lives, they increase their certainty (*yaqin*), belief (*iman*) and contentment (*ridayah*) with Allah and their meeting Him (*liqaullah*). For such people, they are successfully completing each exam, and for them this simply means that they are continuously raising up in their rank; and are pitting the short life of this world against the ever-lasting life of the hereafter; and the disasters here in this world against the enduring treasures of the next world – and for them, these two are not at all comparable to one another. If we take a cursory glance to Karbala in the year 61 AH, we will find such examples of this love at play.⁷

The Apparent Conflict Between the Religious Texts and the Resolution

These types of *ahadith* and verses of the Quran are not small in number in the religious sources, and sometimes people encounter some conflicts by merely studying the outward meaning of such verses of the Quran or *ahadith*.

However, the scholars of Islam have devoted their time to specifically address this issue and solve this challenge; and portions of their books dealing with the Principles of Jurisprudence (*Usul al-Fiqh*) have been devoted to providing solutions to these sorts of contradictions. Most importantly however, the Ahlul

Bayt themselves had foreseen that this would be an issue and have offered solutions to understand such apparent disagreements within their narrations.

Of course when it comes to resolving such issues, the scholars believe that if it is possible to accept both contentions as put forward (without necessarily negating one of them) within the various *ahadith*, then this is what would take precedence in their methodology of resolution; but if that is not possible, then it will inevitably be necessary to follow the rules [which have been put into place and are known by the scholars] to consider one *hadith* ahead of the other.⁸

However, what comes to mind about this question is that these types of verses of the Quran and *ahadith* do not actually have a real conflict, and with a bit of reflection, they can easily be rationalized. In the following portion, we will mention some of the points to clarify what we mean:

A. There are different ‘immutable constants’, and Allah has many unique ‘immutable constants’ which take place in varying circumstances, but the position and time of the usage of each of these is not easily recognizable to us.

Therefore, it is very well possible that the abundance of a bounty may sometimes be a punishment and sometimes be a reward; and on the other side of the spectrum when we look at tribulations – they may occasionally be a form of punishment, and occasionally be a blessing in disguise, or they may be an introduction to the descent of blessings and bounties.

Thus, while we know that ‘immutable constants’ are based on wisdom and are not pointless, however at the same time, we cannot say that because we believe [in Allah], then we should for example, be now drowned in bliss. Perhaps Allah wants us to go through difficulties to achieve a higher degree of faith or raise our status.

In other words, this ‘immutable constants’, which is spoken about in the verse of the Quran [which we previously quoted and also present in other verses], may be specific to certain circumstances; and another tradition or *sunnatullah* is specific to other circumstances.

This analysis which we have just cited is also articulated in the sacred *hadith* (*al-Hadith al-Qudsi*) in which it is mentioned that Allah said:

*There are some believers who can only be corrected through wealth and being needless of others and will perish if they are put into poverty or in need of others; while there are some of My servants who will only be enhanced through poverty, and if they are given wealth and riches, then they will be destroyed.*⁹

B. The descent of blessings from the skies, and the blessings coming forth from the earth are a reality which are not in conflict with the tests, and different kinds of troubles which a believer may face.

As stated in the Quranic verse, it is with faith (*iman*) and God consciousness (*taqwa*) that blessings flow from the skies and come forth from the earth; but Allah may at the same time, test the believers with

other tribulations. For example: by the spread of faith and piety in a community, that community may benefit from the heavenly blessings; however, every single believer who makes up that community may be tested individually with other disasters like illnesses or other such examinations.

In regard to the hadith of Imam al-Sadiq which was mentioned in the question, it is important to note that the Ahlul Bayt who are the epitome of true believers, were sometimes provided with spiritual and material blessings, but at other times, they also suffered various types of trials, most notably the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn on the Day of Ashura.

C. There is certainly no need to consider blessings as being limited to material benefits, because definitely spiritual blessings are also to be kept in mind and anticipated (from Allah). Seeing as how Allah will test the believers with various types of hardships, one of these tests is related to the spiritual blessings, and such a test can bring about perfection within certain individuals.

D. It is possible that someone may say that in the verses under review and just as it appears in the translation, they refer to one societal convention – meaning that if the people believe and display piety, then Allah will send blessings to them. However, in the *hadith*, which was mentioned after the verse, it addresses the personal convention related to each and every individual, and states that if one believes, then Allah will examine that person by way of a variety of tests.

Therefore, to conclude, what we can take away is that the society will enjoy material and spiritual blessings, but at the same time, each and every individual within the society will be tested with the second form of testing – the personal convention of Allah.

O Allah! Send Your prayers upon Muhammad and the family of Muhammad!

1. Bihar al-Anwar, v. 67, p. 239.

2. Bihar al-Anwar, v. 67, p. 243.

3. Bihar al-Anwar, v. 78, p. 279.

4. As it is commonly said in English, ‘What goes around comes around’ – this is perhaps the best way to summarize this belief in a phrase which is prevalent in our society. (Tr.)

5. Tabatabai, Sayyid Muhammad Husayn al-, Tafsir al-Mizan, v. 8, pp. 247–248.

6. Wilayah is an Arabic word derived from the root wa-la-ya (ولایة). In Arabic, wilayah means the coming of something right after another, without any space in between them, and thus calls for the closeness and nearness of these two to each other. Wilayah has been used to denote love and friendship, victory and assistance, following and submission, as well as guardianship and leadership. In regards to wilayah takwini – the last meaning (guardianship and leadership) is the most suitable in terms of context. It means guardianship over all things in this world and to have control over them and to be able to render change in them in any way. Such power primarily belongs only to Allah, but can also be attributed, secondarily, to the prophets and infallible Imams and other spiritually complete individuals. (Tr.)

7. Refer to Question 169 on www.islamquest.net [11] (site:1244) at <http://www.islamquest.net/fa/archive/question/1244> [12].

8. Mozaffar, Mohammad Rida al-, Principles of Islamic Law, v. 3 and 4, p. 233, Dar al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyya, Qum, Second

Edition.

[9. Kulayni, Muhammad b. Ya'qub al-, Al-Kafi, v. 4, p. 54, Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyya, Tehran, 1407 AH.](#)

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