

ESSAYS ON FAITH: WHY DOES GOD ALLOW HIS PEOPLE ON EARTH TO SUFFER?

Publication: SUNDAY GAZETTE-MAIL

Published: 09/30/2001

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"Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: I will create a vicegerent (a deputy) on earth." They said, "Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood? Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy name?" He said, "I know what ye know not." And they said, "O, Adam! dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden, and eat of bountiful things therein as slip from the Garden, and get them out of the state of felicity in which they had been. Get ye down, all ye people with enmity between yourselves. On earth will be your dwelling place and your means of livelihood for a time." The holy Koran Chapter 2, verses 30, 35-36.

When God, praise be to Him, created Adam, peace be upon Him, He gave Adam, and, hence, all of us, the free will to choose. Based on that choice, thus came the good and the bad. Therefore, [so] emerged the sinful acts of mankind. There is no escape. God Almighty, therefore, did not create evil among us. I'm sure a lot of my fellow Muslims will disagree with me on that. However, it is interesting to note that one ancient philosopher said, "Logically, it is impossible for God to give man the free will to choose and at the same time declare there should be no sins."

So the purpose of creating Adam with a free will is to test him and his children so God may reward the good and punish the bad. God Almighty, according to His plan, did not intend for Adam or us to stay in the state of bliss and heaven. But rather to face life on this Earth with all its dangers ranging from man-made disasters to nature's wrath, manifesting in such forms as earthquakes, hurricanes and other calamities. Therefore, the example of creating Adam in the most beautiful form and safe haven is like building a beautiful ship, but keeping it safe in the harbor. Like God's intention for us, the magnificent ship was meant to sail away and face dangers on the seas with its uncertainties and horrific storms and raging fury.

Man-made and nature-made suffering

We can readily see two kinds of suffering: man-made and nature-made.

All the time we hunger for power, wealth and domination of our fellow man. When someone or something stands in our way, we become annoyed and angry. We start stepping on those who stand between us and our wealth and power. Sometimes we threaten them, harm them or even kill them. We may even declare war, if that's what it takes to expand our power and satisfy our greed. Millions of innocent people all over the world are slaughtered, disfigured or rendered refugees, from infants to old people, and people who are black, white, brown and yellow.

We turn to God and ask with anguish and sometimes anger, why? Why do you, O God, all merciful, all just, allow this to happen to all of us? As if it was God who is responsible for all of that. But God almighty in His infinite wisdom and mercy knows and sees and turns mercifully on all of us. God says, I hear your cries, and I see your suffering. I shall punish the guilty sooner or later. I shall erase injustice now. Allah (God) always tests His children, both the faithful and the unfaithful alike. In the case of the unfaithful, suffering becomes a wake-up call. Consider for example the tragedies in New York and Washington. Thousands of innocent people of all faiths tragically died or were injured because of man-made evil. People suddenly became united in pain and suffering and immediately turned to God.

Suddenly, they awoke and spiritually turned to God. They filled churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship. God will take them and forgive them and forgive their sins and bless them so long as they are sincere. Moreover, God will reward them for every ounce of suffering they were inflicted with.

In Islam, Allah through the prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) says, "Man of faith will always suffer and suffer until he comes to me completely purified of all of his sins while the unfaithful shall be like an animal living to eat, sleep and multiply." This means the unfaithful has no spiritual aim in life. So this is one reason that might explain part of our suffering. This is precisely why all major religions are strongly against mercy killing. By pulling the plug on a patient, you are in a sense depriving the person an opportunity of forgiveness and reward from God.

The laws of nature

The other type of suffering we try to explain is of a natural origin. We live on this Earth, and we have to abide, willingly or unwillingly, by the physical laws of nature. Why do people quickly turn to God and blame Him for suffering that comes as a result of a flood or earthquake? You would not curse or blame God if you take a candle outside on a windy day and it goes out. Your sense of reasoning tells you that too much wind puts out the flame. Your sense of reasoning and your understanding of physics tells you not to jump from high places. We know these physical laws.

The big question now is amidst all the suffering, whether it is human or natural, is God a spectator or a participant in our daily life? God is always in control and always watching over us all. For His mercy encompasses everything. God will stop a disaster from happening one time and allow it another. He always has our best interests. God Almighty destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah for their many sins. He flooded the whole world to save humanity and planted the seeds of faith for the future. We cannot just say that everything is predestined and preordained and that there is nothing we can do about it. Otherwise, our prayers and supplications would be in vain. God always answers our prayers. But everything is done according to His infinite wisdom and knowledge. For example, if you pray hard to become rich so that you can be a good and faithful servant and help the poor, God may not answer your prayer because who is to say that you would not be tempted to use your riches for evil deeds? Throughout history, Islam testifies to such examples. If God does not grant your wish in this life, He will in the hereafter. The statement, ask and you shall receive, is very true.

In Islam, Allah tells us to always pray hard. Prayers are strong and a major part of our faith. God tells us our prayers can ward off a disaster or lessen its effects on us.

When the faithful suffer

What better example of suffering of the faithful than God's prophets and messengers? No prophet had suffered more than Muhammad (peace be upon him), Jesus Christ, Job, Noah, John the Baptist (peace be upon all of them) to name a few. The reason for this suffering is because God wants to test their faith and gather them closer to Him. We often wonder why some man of God who is always righteous and fearful of God should lose, for example, his only son? Or be stricken with a disease or blindness, even though he never hurt anyone. The answer can be found in the holy Koran. "Did you think that ye shall enter Heaven without truly being tested to sort out the patient and the struggling?" There is a price to pay to enter Heaven. There is a toll to render to be worthy of God's grace. And that is to enjoin what is good and forbid what is bad and to constantly strive toward the spiritual progression which starts in this brief life and continues indefinitely in the hereafter.

The road to Hell is paved with gold

I feel sorry for those who rob the weak and exploit the indigent and destitute to enrich themselves. They most assuredly have a false sense of security because God deferred their punishment. They think what they are doing is not wrong. But I know and the true men of God know they will not last forever. One day they will have to answer to God. Hell shall be their abiding place to suffer until they are cured of all the spiritual diseases they incurred in this life. And only then with God's grace and mercy they may be forgiven after paying the price. We must always observe God's eternal law: reward the good and punish the evil, irrespective of creed.

The fall of the twin towers has exposed our spiritual foundation. In the wake of tragedy, we know one third of the victims were of Islamic faith. We at the Islamic Association of West Virginia condemn in the strongest terms this barbaric and cowardly act against humanity. We join our Christian and Jewish brothers along with the other people of faith in the suffering and pain and pray to God Almighty to grant the afflicted families the strength and perseverance to cope with this horrible tragedy. Remember, God will always answer prayers. Pray hard, my brothers and sisters. God bless you all, and God bless America.

Qutub, who lives in Charleston, is a former secretary of the Islamic Association.