



# Islamic Queries

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Translated by Saleem Bhimji

Edited by Arifa Hudda



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Translated by Saleem Bhimji ♦ Edited by Arifa Hudda  
iph@iph.ca

## A Reconciliation of Divine Blessings and Divine Punishment

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### Question

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

In some of the *ḥadīth*, [a general theme] has been stated that: “الْبَلَاءُ لِلْوَلَاءِ” – meaning that tribulations will inevitably come upon those who have a firm allegiance (to Allāh ﷻ, the Prophet and the Ahlul Bayt ﷺ).

In addition to this, it has been narrated that Imam ‘Alī ﷺ said: “Tribulations reach our followers quicker than floods reach the valleys.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Bihār al-Anwār*, v. 67, p. 239.

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Imam Mūsā b. Jaʿfar al-Kāzīm عليه السلام 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.”<sup>2</sup>

There are many *aḥādīth* in this regard.

On the other hand, the Quran says:

﴿وَلَوْ أَنَّ أَهْلَ الْقُرَىٰ آمَنُوا وَاتَّقَوْا لَفَتَحْنَا عَلَيْهِم بَرَكَاتٍ مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَٰكِن كَذَّبُوا فَأَخَذْنَاهُم بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ﴾<sup>96</sup>

And if the people of the townships had believed and guarded against evil [observed taqwā], invariably We would have opened for them (the gates of) blessings of the skies and the earth, but they spoke lies (to the Prophets), so We punished them on account of what they used to accomplish.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to all of this, Imam Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq عليه السلام said to Ibn Jundab:

If our Shiʿa 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.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 243.

<sup>3</sup> *Quran*, Sūrah al-Aʿrāf (7), verse 96.

<sup>4</sup> *Bihār al-Anwār*, v. 78 p. 279.

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How can we reconcile these two categories of verses of the Quran and *aḥādīth* 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 *aḥādīth* refer to two categories of the ‘immutable constants of Allāh’s system’ [also known as the *Sunnatullāh*] 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 Allāh’s system’ actually do conflict with one another or not.

### A. The ‘Immutable Constants of Allāh’s System’ (*Sunnatullāh*) in Guiding Humanity

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

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 *aḥādīth*.

Some of them which concern the guidance of humanity have been articulated in Sūrah al-A'raf (chapter 7 of the Noble Quran) where Allāh ﷻ says:

﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِي قَرْيَةٍ مِّن نَّبِيٍّ إِلَّا أَخَذْنَا أَهْلَهَا بِالْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَضَّرَّعُونَ ﴿٩٤﴾ ثُمَّ بَدَّلْنَا مَكَانَ السَّيِّئَةِ الْحَسَنَةَ حَتَّىٰ عَفَوْا وَقَالُوا قَدْ مَسَّ آبَاءَنَا الضَّرَّاءُ وَالسَّرَّاءُ فَأَخَذْنَاهُمْ بَعْتَةً وَهُمْ لَا يَشْعُرُونَ ﴿٩٥﴾ وَلَوْ أَنَّ أَهْلَ الْقُرَىٰ آمَنُوا وَاتَّقَوْا لَفَتَحْنَا عَلَيْهِم بَرَكَاتٍ مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَلَٰكِن كَذَّبُوا فَأَخَذْنَاهُم بِمَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ ﴿٩٦﴾ أَفَأَمِنَ أَهْلُ الْقُرَىٰ أَن يَأْتِيَهُمْ بَأْسُنَا بَيَاتًا وَهُمْ نَائِمُونَ ﴿٩٧﴾ أَوْ آمِنَ أَهْلُ الْقُرَىٰ أَن يَأْتِيَهُمْ بَأْسُنَا ضُحًى وَهُمْ يُلْعَبُونَ ﴿٩٨﴾ أَفَأَمِنُوا مَكْرَ اللَّهِ ۚ فَلَا يَأْمَنُ مَكْرَ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْخَاسِرُونَ ﴿٩٩﴾ أَوْلَمْ يَهْدِ لِلَّذِينَ يَرِثُونَ الْأَرْضَ مِن بَعْدِ أَهْلِهَا أَن لَّو نَشَاءُ أَصَبْنَاهُمْ بِذُنُوبِهِمْ ۚ وَنَطْبَعُ عَلَىٰ قُلُوبِهِمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ ﴿١٠٠﴾﴾

And never did We send any prophet to any township but We afflicted its people with destitution (from Our blessings) and with tribulations so that they might grow humble (before the Almighty). Then We brought comfort (to them) in place of (their) distress until they grew in affluence (number and excess) and said, 'Surely, tribulations and prosperity visited our fore-fathers (also, so it is a normal course of events).' So We seized them by surprise while they perceived not (the

peril they were in). And if the people of the townships had believed and guarded against transgression (observed *taqwā*), We would invariably have opened for them (the gates of) blessings from the skies and the earth, but they belied (the prophets), so We punished them on account of what they used to accomplish. Do the people of these townships feel secure against the coming of Our punishment upon them by night while they are asleep? Do the people of these townships feel secure against the coming of Our punishment upon them in the early part of the day while they are engaged in futile and frivolous (worldly) pursuits? Do they feel secure from the plan of Allāh? No one at all feels secure from Allāh's plan, except the people who are (doomed to be) losers. Does it not serve as guidance to those who have inherited the earth from its (previous) occupants that if We will, We can afflict them (with some punishment) for their sins and put a seal upon their hearts, so that they will not be able to listen (to some guiding advice).<sup>5</sup>

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

1. Whenever people are called to faith (*īmān*), Allāh ﷻ will first inflict them with difficulty and suffering, so that they may revert to Allāh ﷻ with anguish and humility.
2. If these hardships do not soften their hearts, then Allāh ﷻ will turn these difficulties into pleasures and enjoyable things, and thereby

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<sup>5</sup> *Quran*, Sūrah al-A'raf (7), verses 94-100.

spiritual negligence (*ghaflah*) and forgetfulness of Him will take them over such that they will remain in their past ways of spiritual misguidedness, and then He will torment them. This is known as the ‘Divine Practice of Reprieve’ (*imhāl*) and the ‘Divine Practice of Gradual Punishment’ (*istidrāj*).

3. If those people eventually believe and the difficulties that they faced end up bringing them closer to Allāh ﷻ, then He will send down His blessings from the skies and from within the earth for them.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Allāh ﷻ 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 Allāh ﷻ, 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 Allāh, the Gracious, and the purpose which Allāh ﷻ has ordained for them.

The deviation and disruption in the movement of even one component of these multiple components [of the universe], especially

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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 Allāh ﷻ 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 Allāh 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 (*fiṭrah*) and remain away from the path of human happiness which Allāh ﷻ has set for it,



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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!<sup>6</sup>

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 (*āyātullāh*) that should make a recalcitrant community repent and turn back to the straight path of the intrinsic human nature (*fiṭrah*) – and in fact it is a show of difficulty (*‘usr*) after ease (*yusr*).

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<sup>6</sup> 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.)

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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.<sup>7</sup>

### The Tribulations and Severe Exams of the Believers

There are verses of the Quran and various *aḥādīth* 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 *aḥādīth*, 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 (*wilāyah takwīnī*).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ṭabāʾṭabāʾī, Sayyid Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-, *Tafsīr al-Mizān*, v. 8, pp. 247-248.

<sup>8</sup> *Wilāyah* is an ‘Arabic word derived from the root *wa-la-ya* (ولي). In Arabic, *wilāyah* 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. *Wilāyah* has been used to denote love and friendship, victory and assistance, following and submission, as well as guardianship and leadership. In regards to *wilāyah takwīnī* – the last meaning (guardianship and leadership) is the most suitable in terms of context. It

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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 Allāh ﷻ.
4. An increased display of humility and asking from Allāh ﷻ and remembrance of Him, and the acquisition of the provisions needed for the journey of the hereafter. Of course, the friends of Allāh (*awliyāʾ*) themselves welcome such difficulties with satisfaction and are thankful for these challenges; and as these adversities come in their lives, they increase their certainty (*yaqīn*), belief (*īmān*) and contentment (*riḍāyah*) with Allāh ﷻ and their meeting Him (*liqāʾullāh*). 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 every 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.<sup>9</sup>

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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 ﷻ, but can also be attributed, secondarily, to the prophets and infallible Imams and other spiritually complete individuals. (Tr.)

<sup>9</sup> Refer to Question 169 on [www.islamquest.net](http://www.islamquest.net) (site: 1244) at <http://www.islamquest.net/fa/archive/question/1244>.

## The Apparent Conflict Between the Religious Texts and the Resolution

These types of *aḥādīth* and verses of the *Qurān* 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 *Qurān* or *aḥādīth*. 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 (*Uṣūl al-Fiqh*) have been devoted to providing solutions to these sorts of contradictions. Most importantly however, the Ahlul Bayt ﷺ 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 *aḥādīth*, 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 *ḥadīth* ahead of the other.<sup>10</sup>

However, what comes to mind about this question is that these types of verses of the *Qurān* and *aḥādīth* do not actually have a real conflict, and with a bit of reflection, they can easily be rationalized. In

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<sup>10</sup> Mozaffar, Moḥammad Riḍā al-, *Principles of Islamic Law*, v. 3 and 4, p. 233, Dar al-Kutub Al-ʿIlmiyya, Qum, Second Edition.

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the following portion, we will mention some of the points to clarify what we mean:

A. There are different ‘immutable constants’, and Allāh ﷻ 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 Allāh ﷻ], then we should for example, be now drowned in bliss. Perhaps Allāh ﷻ 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 *sunnatullāh* is specific to other circumstances.

This analysis which we have just cited is also articulated in the sacred ḥadīth (*al-Ḥadīth al-Qudsī*) in which it is mentioned that Allāh ﷻ 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.<sup>11</sup>

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 (*īmān*) and God consciousness (*taqwā*) that blessings flow from the skies and come forth from the earth; but Allāh ﷻ 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 regards to the *ḥadīth* of Imam al-Ṣādiq ؑ 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-Ḥusayn ؑ on the day of ‘Āshūrā’.

C. There is certainly no need to consider blessings as being limited to material benefits, because definitely spiritual blessings are also to

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<sup>11</sup> Kulaynī, Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb al-, *Al-Kāfi*, v. 4, p. 54, Dar al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, Tehrān, 1407 AH.

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be kept in mind and anticipated (from Allāh ﷻ). Seeing as how Allāh ﷻ 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 Allāh ﷻ will send blessings to them. However in the *ḥadīth* which was mentioned after the verse, it addresses the personal convention related to each and every individual, and states that if one believes, then Allāh ﷻ 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 Allāh ﷻ.



*O Allāh! Send Your prayers upon Muḥammad and the family of Muḥammad!*

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