

How can a caring God allow suffering?

A friend says she doesn't believe in God because, "How can a caring, all-Powerful God allow so much suffering in the world? I can't believe in that kind of God." What do you say?

Grappling with Suffering: An Existential and Spiritual Inquiry

When our friend articulates disbelief in God on the account of rampant suffering and chaos in the world, it echoes a profoundly existential question that has reverberated through the past century. The question is not merely theological but deeply existential, invoking reflections on the **purpose**, **nature**, and **essence** of our earthly stay.



Challenges: Examinations of our Ethical and Spiritual Mettle

1. This world isn't meant to be a paradise.
2. It's a natural world, with all its beauty and imperfections.
3. Expecting life to be perfect is a modern thing. There was a lot more suffering in the past and it didn't stop people believing.

The Islamic viewpoint on this question is as follows: the divine wisdom behind allowing suffering and hardship is as a test of our **moral, ethical, and spiritual mettle**. How do we respond to adversity? Do we succumb to despair, or do we emerge resilient, imbuing our experiences with meaning, thereby spiritually ascending through them?

For those who believe only in this world, the question of suffering becomes all the more acute, because there is an almost mystical expectation that this life should have endless comfort and be void of tribulation. This anthropocentric attitude to life and the universe could be seen as the grand delusion of modern man. And when setbacks strike, there is a sense of shock and betrayal because there is no 'meaning framework' to help make sense of it all.

As Victor Frankl put it, "More people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for."

Yet, even without belief in God, we know the nature of this world is constant change, with things emerging, reaching a zenith then fading; and catastrophes wiping out life, only for it to re-emerge emboldened.

For believers in an Afterlife, this world, with all its faults and suffering, holds immense meaning and opportunity – which we will explore shortly. Believers do not expect perfection from this world. Indeed, all those things which in modern times people expect of this earth, believers expect in the Afterlife, and much more besides!

"Blessed is the One in Whose Hands rests all authority. And He is Most Capable of everything. He is the One Who created life and death in order to test which of you is best in deeds. And He is the Almighty, All-Forgiving." (Qur'an 67:1-2)

Many people today cannot comprehend the scale of suffering that humans have always endured – being brutally ravaged by enemy raids and wars, hunger and famine, losing children (a lot) and women dying in childbirth. None of this deterred people from having faith – if anything, it reinforced their faith.

Even in modern times, without the benefit of religious belief, coming to terms with the trials of life and death, finding meaning in it all, is a recognised human psychological need, termed ‘self-acceptance’. Indeed, therapists recognise that inability to accept hardship and suffering contributes to mental illness and this is something many therapies try to address.

The Essence of Contrast: Discerning the Value of Blessings

1. A lot of evil is actually manmade
2. The challenges in this world are a test for us to address
If you believe in God...
6. Any suffering here is compensated many times over
7. You can't appreciate good unless there is a contrast

It is often through the lens of suffering that blessings are truly discerned and appreciated. The contrast between hardship and ease enhances our emotional and spiritual capacities to cherish, appreciate, and be grateful for the blessings that permeate our lives.

Reward Beyond Measure: The Consolation of the Hereafter

When one embodies a belief in the Akhirah (the Hereafter), every moment of suffering that is endured with patience and prayer, is rewarded many times in the life to come: the eternal bliss and divine proximity that await the patient believer transform temporal pain into an investment for an **eternal and unimaginable reward in the Hereafter.**

“O believers! Seek comfort in patience and prayer. God is truly with those who are patient.” (Qur’an 2:153)

“Only those who endure patiently will be given their reward without limit.”
(Qur’an 39:10)

Holy Prophet (SAW) said:

“No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he receives from a thorn, but that Allah expiates some of his sins for that.”

(Al-Bukhari)

We sometimes forget that even the prophets suffered. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) witnessed the death of six of his seven children within his own lifetime – a level of suffering which would have permanently crippled many of us today. Yet his drive was undeterred and his eyes were set on the Afterlife.

Anas b. Malik reported that God's Messenger (ﷺ) said that:

“One amongst the denizens of Hell who had led a life of ease and plenty amongst the people of the world would be made to dip in Fire only once on the Day of Resurrection and then it would be said to him:

‘O son of Adam, did you find any comfort, did you happen to get any material blessing?’ He would say: ‘By God, no, my Lord.’

And then that person from amongst the persons of the world [would] be brought who had led the most miserable life (in the world) from amongst the inmates of Paradise. And he would be made to dip once in Paradise and it would be said to him. ‘O son of Adam, did you face any hardship? Or had any distress fallen to your lot?’

And he would say: **‘By God, no, O my Lord, never did I face any hardship or experience any distress.’**”

(Sahih Muslim, 2807)

8. Suffering brings people closer to God – humans remember God more when they really need something!

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

“How wonderous is the affair of the believer, for his affairs are all good, and that does not apply for anyone except the believer. If something good happens to him he gives thanks, and that is good for him; if something bad happens to him he bears it with patience, and that is good for him.”

(Sahih Muslim, 2999)

Part of the patience mentioned by the Prophet (PBUH) is in turning to God for strength.

People are more ardent in prayers when they are in real need and God is particularly responsive to those who face the greatest tribulations:

The Prophet (PBUH) mentioned:

“God says, ‘Beware of the supplication of the oppressed, even if he is an unbeliever, for there is no barrier between it and God.’” (Ahmad)

Benefits of belief in Predestination (Qadr)

Scenario:

A Muslim friend really wanted to be a doctor but he didn't get the GCSE science grades that would have made it possible.

He is very down and says,

"I can't bring myself to pray to God when He's done this to me."

What would you say to help him?

Profound Wisdom in Setbacks: Embracing Qadr (Divine Decree/fate)

Moving towards a personal note, for our friend aspiring to be a doctor, the disappointment and despair are palpably real. Here, embracing the concept of Qadr (Divine Decree) becomes instrumental. It's a gentle reminder that our plans are subordinate to a divine wisdom that permeates every atom of our existence. A setback may indeed be a setup for a greater comeback, redirecting our path towards avenues where our potential can be realized and optimized in ways unimaginable to us.

- Duas - hopefulness/optimism
- Belief in our personal destiny – “doors have to close for better doors to open”.
- Coming to terms with adversity/setbacks – it was God’s will.
- Learning from past mistakes rather than regretting.
- Humility - we are not the masters of our destiny, we do not have automatic right to eternal good health and life.
- Even more gratitude when things **do** go well.

Our personal destiny

- God is *Al-Hadi*, the Guide, *Al-Muhaimin*, The Guardian, and *Al-Hakim* – the Most Wise
- God has willed great things for you!
- Are we going to take on the challenge?
- Everything happens for a reason, even setbacks
- But the eventual outcome is good
- A hardship now may lead to greater success tomorrow.
- You may have wished to achieve one thing, but God intended something better for you, that you could really flourish in.

“It is He who has control over the heavens and earth and has no offspring—no one shares control with Him—and who created all things and made them to an exact measure.”

(Qur'an 25:2)

“Perhaps you dislike something which is good for you and like something which is bad for you. God knows and you do not know.”

(Qur'an 2:216)

Destiny and Unforeseen Blessings: The Benevolent Planner

The concept of destiny in Islam is not fatalistic but rather one that interweaves divine knowledge and wisdom with human endeavour. It's a beautiful paradox where our sincere efforts, aspirations, and endeavours are enveloped by God's supreme knowledge and wisdom. Our unsuccessful attempt to tread a desired path may indeed be a **merciful redirection** towards a destiny more beautifully aligned with our intrinsic capabilities and potential.

“And with Him are the keys of the unseen; none knows them except Him. And He knows what is on the land and in the sea. Not a leaf falls but that He knows it. And no grain is there within the darknesses of the earth and no moist or dry [thing] but that it is [written] in a clear record.”

(Qur'an 6:59)

Tackling Adversity with Prophetic Wisdom: The Ethos of Learning, Positivity and Proactivity

The teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) encapsulate a profound wisdom in navigating through the landscapes of trials and tribulations. His life exemplifies an ethos of unwavering positivity, resilience, and proactivity in the face of adversity, encapsulating a perfect model for us to emulate.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

“Whoever persists in being patient, God will make him patient. Nobody can be given a blessing better and greater than patience.” (Al-Bukhari)

A teaching to help us through life is that **a setback is an opportunity for learning**. We see that the Prophet (PBUH) faced many disappointments but always learnt from them and adapted dynamically.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “The believer is not stung twice from the same hole.” (Bukhari)

Managing adversity - Coming to terms with it & not regretting

The Prophet ﷺ said:

“If something befalls you, then do not say, ‘If only I had done something else.’ Rather say, ‘God has decreed what he wills.’ Verily, the phrase ‘if only’ opens the way for the work of Satan.”

(Muslim)

In Conclusion

Life, with its myriad hues of joy and sorrow, is a journey that polishes the soul, offering in its every step opportunities for spiritual growth, moral enhancement, and an intimate communion with our Creator. In the gentle embrace of Islam, every trial is imbued with profound wisdom, every prayer a conversation with the divine, and every setback a potential setup for a blessed comeback, under the compassionate gaze of Al-Wadood (The Most Loving), Al-Hakeem (The Most Wise), and Al-Rahman (The Most Merciful).

By navigating through life's tests with a heart anchored in divine trust and eyes focused on the eternal abode, we allow our souls to transcend the ephemeral, to find peace amidst chaos, and to perceive the profound wisdom that subtly threads through our earthly journey, guiding us towards eternal serenity, divine proximity, and an abode where sorrow is forever absent.

Further reading:

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/reconciling-the-divine-decree-and-free-will-in-islam>

<https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/when-our-worlds-are-shaken-finding-strength-in-beautiful-patience>