

Natural Disasters: Test, Punishment, or Blessing?

Khalid Baig

Within the space of a few seconds in August an entire city was demolished and an entire country was badly shaken. The earthquake in Turkey that left an estimated 200,000 people homeless and that killed and wounded about 50,000 people has been called the 'disaster of the century.' Quite naturally, Muslims the world over have felt the pain and sufferings of their brothers and sisters in Turkey.

No one can predict or prevent an earthquake. But even if we were able to predict their occurrence, as we can such natural disasters as hurricanes or floods, they would remain a reminder of how fragile we really are. Our ability to harness the forces of nature can give us the illusion that we are the masters of the universe. But this ability is granted by God and only to the extent that He Wills. The power of the most arrogant and "mighty" kings, presidents, military generals, or armies of all sorts combined together is nothing compared to the Power of God as manifested by a small earthquake.

As a result of the earthquake even some of the fanatically anti-Islamic generals of Turkey suddenly, though temporarily, remembered Allah. Such flashes of faith are common. The most die-hard atheist or skeptic may suddenly find God when faced with an extreme suffering or danger. It is a testimony to the belief in God that has been built into our nature by the Creator. But as soon as the danger subsides, many go back to their old ways. Then they begin to rationalize the reactions they had during the moment of truth. They start suggesting that natural disasters are just random events that show the power and fury of a blind nature that scientists hope to tame completely one day.

To the non-believers it seems like that. They point out that an earthquake — or any natural disaster for that matter — hits the sinners and saints alike. It makes no distinction between a believer and a non-believer. Further, they say it makes no sense, because we cannot make any sense out of it.

We should know the hollowness of these assertions. To say that something has no logic because we cannot understand its logic is to show arrogance not wisdom. It is not true that these events have the same impact on the believers as the non-believers. For the fact is that the two groups of people do not look at events in life, including disasters, the same way, they do not draw the same conclusions from them, and do not end up in the same place with respect to them. While the shaking of the ground may shake the world of the non-believer, it strengthens the faith of the believer who knows that not a leaf can fall on the ground without the Will of Allah. It is because of our very limited knowledge and understanding that many events appear to us to be random and devoid of purpose. In reality all events in this universe happen only by leave of the All-Knowing, All-Wise, All-Powerful God. There is a purpose behind all of this and understanding that purpose enables us to cope with them.

Why do sufferings happen in this life? There are two answers.

For the believers they are a test of patience and submission to the Will of God.

وَلْتَبْلُوْنَكُمْ بِسَيِّئٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ
وَتَقْصِصِ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالْثَّمَرَاتِ
وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ ﴿١٥٥﴾ الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمُ
مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاغِبُونَ

Be sure We shall test you with something of fear and hunger, some loss of goods, lives, and the fruits (of your toil), but give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere. Who say, when afflicted with a calamity: 'To Allah we belong, and to Him is our return.' [Al-Baqarah 2:155-156].

All hardships in life — over which we have no control — thus become an opportunity for gaining rewards in the hereafter by exercising patience. Islam, as we know very well, means submission to Allah. It means submission to the Command of Allah in areas within our control. It means submission to the Will of Allah in areas beyond our control.

For the sinners they are a punishment.

وَلَنُذِيقَنَّهُمْ مِنَ الْعَذَابِ الْأَلَدِّ نَ ذُونَ الْعَذَابِ

الْأَكْبَرِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

And indeed We will make them taste of the lighter chastisement before the greater chastisement in order that they may repent and return. [As-Sajda 32:21].

But even this punishment will turn out to be a mercy for those who heed the wake-up call and mend their ways; it will spare them the much greater punishment in the hereafter.

According to clear Islamic teachings in both the Qur'an and the Hadith, every hardship in life — sickness, accidents, monetary losses, natural disasters, difficulties of all kinds — can be either a punishment or a blessing in disguise. There is no difference in the apparent manifestation of the two. The plague killed thousands of the Companions of the Prophet ﷺ, during the time of Sayyidna Umar, Radi-Allahu anhu, as it did thousands of non-believers in other parts of the world. But who can say that these were the same incidents, with the same consequences?

How do we, then, know whether a particular suffering is a punishment or a blessing for us? The answer given by scholars is: By examining our own feelings. If the suffering brings us close to Allah; if we find ourselves turning to Him in prayers and repentance; if we feel the pain yet do not complain about the 'injustice' of nature to us; if we submit and patiently persevere, then the suffering is indeed a blessing in disguise that will bring tremendous rewards in the hereafter. On the other hand if as a result of the hardship we turn away from Allah; if we complain and ask 'why me?'; if our focus is only on apparent causes and remedies and not on the Creator who Creates and Controls the causes themselves, then these are the signs that, God forbid, the suffering is a punishment and a greater punishment awaits us in the hereafter!

The earthquake in Turkey has no doubt entailed massive human suffering. But the greater tragedy will be if we fail to learn from the 'disaster of the century,' and remain stubborn about our crooked ways of disobedience to Allah and defiance of His Shariah. The earthquake that will take place on the Day of Judgment will be much more stronger; on that day the whole earth will be shaken. And there will be no end to the sufferings it will cause to those who refuse to learn from the much smaller earthquake now.

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