# Questions on destiny and human free will

**Question:** Are we victims of Destiny? Do we have any part in the calamities befalling us?

**Answer:** As this question has been discussed earlier, I will a summarized account.

No one is a victim of Destiny. God does not destine our acts; rather, He creates whatever we will to do. Destiny's decrees or verdicts are based on Its consideration of our free will.

We are directly responsible for whatever happens to us. If we experience misfortune, it is either because we have misused our free will or because, as with Prophets, God wills to promote us to higher ranks. For example, the sun is absolutely necessary for and indispensable to life. If we stay outside too long and die of sunstroke, can we blame the sun? Of course not, for we could have gone inside or taken sufficient precautions. In the same way, our free will (not Destiny) is responsible for any misfortune that comes our way. Blaming Destiny only causes the misfortune to worsen.

To cite another example: God Almighty created and endowed us with certain faculties or powers, one of which is lust. If we use this power improperly and thus harm ourselves, it can only be our fault. God gave us this power so that we may reproduce the species in the proper manner and be promoted to higher spiritual ranks by resisting our carnal self's illicit suggestions. It is the same with anger. God Almighty gave it to us so that we can defend ourselves and our religious and social values, not to hurt others. Therefore, if an uncontrolled burst of anger causes us to kill someone, it is our fault, not Destiny's.

Destiny relates to both the cause and the effect simultaneously. If we judge only by considering the effect, usually we make mistakes. For example, if we accuse a father of abusing his daughter while he only is trying to discipline her because he likes her or so that she may reform herself and learn how to behave properly, we would be wronging the father. We should consider all related information while judging any event. If we will cannot see any good in it, we should tell ourselves that whatever God does is good either in itself or in its consequences, and never accuse Destiny. This is what is meant by: It may be that you dislike a thing although it is good for you, and love a thing although it is bad for you. God knows but you know not (2:216).

In such calamities as earthquakes or floods, God usually does not choose between the good and the evil or the innocent and the guilty. Such calamities fall on everyone, for they are part of the tests and trials prepared for us and serve His purpose. However, in return for undergoing such calamities, good and innocent people will receive a great reward in the Hereafter. Also, it should be pointed out that sometimes God uses calamities to punish such people, because they do not try to enjoin what is good and prevent what is evil.

Whatever God does is the best and most proper. So, we should try to see His wisdom behind the good He bestows on us and the suffering to which He subjects us.

**Question:** Why does so insignificant a thing as free will cause one to deserve eternal Paradise or Hell?

**Answer:** When we compare God's acts and creation with our own function in existence, we see that the role of human free will is really insignificant. As a result, some have denied it. Followers of the middle path in this matter have concluded that human free will is an inclination, something like or inclination, or more of a preference for one or more of our internal inclinations, and then acting upon that inclination. It is actually like flicking a switch to light a house or a city.

Before asking why God Almighty may condemn us to eternal Hellfire if we misuse of our free will during our short lifespan, we should think about whether we really can deserve eternal Paradise by using our free will correctly. Should we not consider whether we ever can thank God enough for the bounties He pours upon us? If we worshipped Him during our entire life without stopping, we could not thank Him enough even for our eyes.

As pointed out earlier, a pomegranate or a cherry has the same cost as the universe, for its growth or production requires the cooperation of air, water, soil, and the sun, none of which we could produce. Furthermore, God Almighty asks us to assign only a small amount of time for worship. We seldom need more than one hour to perform the five prescribed daily prayers. The amount of wealth we are enjoined to give in charity is, in most cases, only one-fortieth of what we have. We have to go on pilgrimage (hajj) only once, and only if we can afford it. The rest of our life and wealth is for worldly things. Despite this, God, the All-Merciful, promises us eternal Paradise, the blessings and beauties of which are beyond imagination. So first of all, we should think about God's infinite mercy, which enfolds us and invites us to Paradise.

Now we will answer the question.

Intention. Our intention is critical. The Messenger of God, upon him be peace and blessings, says: *“Actions are judged according to intentions. Whatever you intend to do, you get the reward thereof. So, whoever emigrates for God and His Messenger has emigrated for God and His Messenger; whoever emigrates to acquire something worldly or to marry a woman immigrates to what is intended.”*

Intention is the spirit of our actions and determines how we will be rewarded (or punished). If you do not eat or drink during the day, but made no intention to fast, you are not counted as having fasted. If you fasts without intending to obtain God's good pleasure, you receive no reward. If you are killed fighting to exalt or strengthen the Word of God, you die as a martyr and go, by God's will, to Paradise. If you are killed while fighting for any other cause, such as fame or wealth, you are not considered a martyr and most probably will not be admitted to Paradise. So, you are rewarded (or punished) according to your intention.

If you have a firm belief in God and the pillars of faith, and intend to believe in them [as if you were to live eternally], you will be rewarded with eternal happiness in Paradise. If you have removed your inborn tendency to believe, and thus intend not to believe even if you were to live forever, you will cause your own eternal punishment. In the case of people whose unbelief is deeply ingrained and who have lost the capacity to believe, the Qur'an says: As for the unbelievers, it is the same whether you warn them or warn them not. They will not believe. God has set a seal on their hearts and on their hearing, and on their eyes is a covering (2:6-7)

Punishment for Unbelief. A given punishment is determined by the nature and result of the crime and the person's intention, not to how long it took commit the act.

Murder, which takes only a couple of minutes or even seconds to commit, is often punished by many years—even life—in jail or the death sentence. Unbelief is infinitely more serious than murder. If you accuse truthful and innocent people of lying and deception, they will be very angry with you. Unbelief also means the following:

* Denying the true testimony of innumerable creatures, from atoms to huge galaxies, to their Creator's existence and Unity, and accusing them of lying or giving false testimony.
* Denying God, the Unique Creator, Sustainer, and Administrator of the existence, and degrading His innumerable works of art.
* Accusing more than 100,000 Prophets of the most abased form of lying, deception, and trickery. And this despite the fact that according to the testimony of history and the people to whom they were sent, they are the most truthful of all humanity.
* Accusing believers of following the greatest tricksters of human history. Such a view also insults and accuses innumerable believers from the time of Adam of deception and deviation.

For these and other similar reasons, it is pure justice to condemn unbelief to the eternal punishment of Hell.

However insignificant our free will appears, and however slight a sin unbelief may seem to be at first sight, unbelief is a denial and negation and therefore destructive. Remember that we likened free will to flicking a switch to illuminate a room. Flicking a switch off can throw a whole city into darkness. A lit match can destroy a huge, magnificent palace in a couple of minutes, even though it took hundreds of workers several years to build it. More immediate, remember that it a single bullet fired by a Serbian ignited the First World War and led to massive death and destruction.

Also, suppose there is a garden containing all kids of flowers and trees in which birds sing and animals live. These plants and animals need the water reaching them through the canals if they are to survive. Someone is responsible for opening those canals so that water can flow through them. If that person, for whatever reason, did not allow the water to flow and thus killed everything in the garden, what would be an appropriate punishment? The act of unbelief is equivalent to such an act, but on the scale of the creation as a whole.

Unbelief is an unforgivable ingratitude. How can you deny Him Who brought you into existence from non-existence, gave you so many faculties (e.g., reason, intellect, heart, memory, and insight, and inner and outer senses), and nourishes you with numerous varieties of food and drink? Such people prepare their own doom, and their punishment must be equal to their action (of denial).

Even if we all worked together, we could not create even one fruit, one leaf, or one blade of grass. Denying the existence of the One Who can do all of this, and Who created this huge universe and gave us dominion over it, is the worst sin that we can commit, and so deserves the most lasting and severest punishment.

Also, Satan tries to lead us astray by inviting us to unbelief and dissipation. Our evil-commanding soul was given to us so that we could rise to higher ranks by refining it. Our conscience innately feels the existence of God, the Creator and Sustainer of beings, and feelings that long for eternity can be satisfied only with eternity. Followers of Satan, unbelievers who are ruled by their desires and their evil-commanding selves, close their conscience to innumerable signs of God in themselves and the universe, extinguish their feelings related to eternity, and blind themselves to the Creator's most manifest signs: the Qur'an Prophet Muhammad, and all other Prophets, upon them be peace.

Punishment varies. The punishment for violating a trust is proportional to its significance and its true owner. A child who breaks a window does not receive the same punishment as an aide-de-camp who loses or breaks the king's crown. If a private and a commander spend the money they received (based on their rank) on petty things and so wasted it, the commander certainly would receive a much greater punishment than the private. If a scientist responsible for carrying out scientific investigations spent the resources entrusted to her on studying trifling things, certainly she would be punished far more severely than a shepherd who spent the resources assigned to her on meeting her own needs instead of those of her animals.

Animals do not misuse or waste the capital of life assigned to them. They do whatever they must: some carry burdens, some give milk and meat, and others produce honey or silk for our use. Only we can spend our resources according to own desires. Given this fact, as well as the earlier-mentioned bounties that God has given us due to our status as His vicegerents on Earth, our misuse of these resources results in a very severe punishment. If we allow ourselves to be dominated by our evil-commanding selves and not our hearts (which must overflow with knowledge and love of the Creator), we are destined to become fuel for the fires of Hell.

**Question:** The Prophet says that at the sixth week of an embryo's development, God sends an angel to write whether it will be righteous and prosperous or wicked and condemned. What does this mean, and how can we reconcile it with human free will?

**Answer:** In addition to what has been said above, we will make the following comments.

Destiny is a title of Divine Knowledge. It does not cancel our free will or force us to behave in a preordained way. Since God knows beforehand what we will do and say (as He is not constrained by our concept of time), He has an angel write down our life-history. We behave according to the dictates of our free will, not because God wrote down our future life.

Destiny is related both to the cause and the effect. There are not two separate destinies, one for the cause, the other for the effect. God knows beforehand how we will behave in a given circumstance, and His preknowledge does not negate our free will.

Only God knows whether we will go to Paradise or Hell. Although unbelief deserves eternal punishment, we may not say that unbelievers are going to Hell, for one day they might accept belief and go to Paradise. Many atheists have become Muslims. Islam came to guide unbelievers to faith and worship, and to eternal happiness in Paradise.

**Question:** What does Islamic fitra (primordial nature) mean?

**Answer:** In an authentic hadith, the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, says that all infants are born with this Islamic fitra, and then their parents cause them to adopt another faith (or no faith at all).

This hadith means that everyone has the innate potential to become a Muslim. Islam is the natural religion of all creatures, as it means “peace, salvation, and obedience.” Since everything obeys God absolutely and functions according to His laws, all creatures are Muslim. Every being's bodily structure, regardless of religion or lack thereof, whether they are human or jinn, are Muslim, for all bodies operate according to the laws God Almighty determined for them. If a new-born could lead a completely monastic life free of environmental effects, he or she would remain a natural Muslim.

This hadith also means that a newborn's mind is like a tape on which anything can be recorded, a lump of dough that can be shaped in any way, a blank paper on which anything can be written. If you could protect your mind from any external source of corruption, you could receive anything related to Islam easily and become a perfect Muslim. But if your mind becomes impure, or you inject into it the tenets, beliefs, and conduct of another religion (or of atheism), you either will adopt another faith or encounter many problems on your way to becoming a good Muslim.

Newborns resemble seeds that can produce good Muslims, for they are all seeds of future Muslims. Adverse conditions cause these seeds to be deformed or spoiled, and these people eventually adopt another faith or none at all. Therefore, to grow good Muslims, we have to do our best to improve our familial and surrounding social conditions. After children reach puberty, sins are a primary cause of deformed seeds. As every sin has the potential to lead people to unbelief, we must protect ourselves against sin. Family, education, and social environment are also of great importance.