

Lesson 15: An Analysis of Misfortune and Hardship

The question of God's justice involves certain problems, such as the existence of disasters, loss and evil in the natural order, and inequalities in the social order. This question arouses, in fact, a whole storm of questions and objections in the minds of many people. The problems they face are so fundamental that what start out as doubts and hesitations, ultimately become an indissoluble complex.

Such people ask how it is possible that in a world created on the basis of intelligence and wisdom, so much suffering, pain and evil should prevail; that the world should be subjected constantly to the successive blows of hardship and misfortune, with loss and deficiency always in the ascendant.

Why is it that in various parts of the world, terrible, overwhelming events assault mankind, resulting in untold loss and destruction? Why is one person ugly and another beautiful, one healthy and another sick? Why are all men not created equal, and does not their inequality point to an absence of justice in the universe?

Justice in the order of things depends on its being free of oppression, discrimination and disaster, or the absence from it of all defect, sickness, and poverty; this, they say, alone would result in perfection and justice.

We must begin by admitting that our evaluation of the affairs of the universe does not permit us to penetrate the ultimate depths of phenomena; it is inadequate for the analysis of the ends and purposes of things.

Our initial understanding of unpleasant events and disasters is bound to be superficial; we are not prepared to recognize any truth lying beyond our initial impression. We cannot, at the outset, delineate the ultimate aims of those events, and we, therefore, regard them as signs of injustice. Our feelings become aroused and lead us into the most illogical analyses.

But if we reflect more profoundly, we will see that this one sided evaluation of events we label injustice comes from making our interests or those of people to whom we are directly or indirectly related, our criterion and yardstick. Whatever secures our interests is good, and whatever harms us is bad. In other words, our judgment of good and bad is based on a short-eyed perception narrow horizons of thought, and a lack of precise knowledge concerning the norms of creation.

Is our existence the only issue involved in every occurrence? Can we make our own profit and loss into the criterion of good and evil? Our material world is constantly engaged in producing change. Events that did not exist today will occur tomorrow— some things will disappear and others will take their place

It is obvious that what is useful and beneficial for some people today will cease to exist tomorrow. But for us who are human beings and attached to our own existence and the things of the world, the acquisition of things is good and their loss is bad. But despite man and his attachments, the changing nature of the world produces constantly changing phenomena. If the world did not comprehend the possibility of change, phenomena themselves would not exist, and, therefore, there could also be no question of good and evil.

In such a hypothetical, unchanging world there would be neither loss and deficiency nor growth and development, no contrast or differentiation, no variety or multiplicity, no compounding or motion. In a world without deficiency or loss, there would also be no human, moral or social criteria, limits, or laws. Development and change are the result of the motion and rotation of the planets if they ceased to exist, there would be no earth, no moon and no sun, no day, no month and no year.

A somewhat comprehensive view of the world will permit us to understand that what is harmful for us today, or may be so in the future, is beneficial for others. The world as a whole moves in the direction dictated by the overall purpose of being and benefit of being; individuals may suffer harm in this process, and it may even be that mankind at large does not stand to benefit.

Were we able to plunge deeply enough into the ocean of knowledge and turn the pages of its book replete with mysteries with the finger of our understanding, the ultimate purpose and outcome of all events and phenomena would be revealed to us. However, our power of judgment is not sufficiently comprehensive to deal with the complex web that confronts us: we know neither the chain of preceding causes that have produced the phenomena of today, nor the chain of future effects those phenomena, in turn, will produce.

If it were possible for us to look down from above on the broad plain of the world, in such a way that we could see all the positive and negative aspects of everything, all the mysteries of everything occurring in the world; if it were possible for us to evaluate the effects and results of every event in history, past, present and future and everything occurring between pre-eternity and post-eternity, and, if this were possible for us, then we might be able to say that the harm of a given event outweighed its benefit and

brand it as evil.

But does man have such comprehensive awareness of the horizontal and vertical chains of causality? Can he situate himself on the moving axis of the world?

Since we do not dispose of such an ability, since we will never be able to traverse so infinite a distance, however long be our stride; since we will never be able to lift the veil from all these complexities and take their due measure, it is best that we refrain from one-sided and hasty judgments that are based on our own short-sightedness.

We should recognize that we must not make our own benefit the sole criterion for judging this vast universe. The relative observations we make within the framework of the limited data at our disposal and the specific conditions to which we are subject can never furnish criteria for a definitive judgment.

Nature may often be working toward the fulfillment of a particular goal that is unimaginable to man, given his conventional circumstances. Why cannot it not be supposed that unpleasant occurrences are the result of efforts aimed at preparing the ground for a new phenomenon that will be the instrument of God's will upon earth? It may be that the conditions and circumstances of the age necessitate such processes.

If all the changes and upheavals that terrify us did not take place within a given plan and design and for the sake of a specific aim, if they were to be extended throughout time without producing any positive or constructive result, there would be no trace on earth of any living creature, including man.

Why should we accuse the world of injustice, of being chaotic and unstable, simply because of a few exceptional occurrences and phenomena in nature? Should we start objecting because of a handful of unpleasantness, major and minor, forgetting all the manifestations of precision and wisdom, all the wonders we see in the world and its creatures, that testify to the will and intelligence of an exalted being?

Since man sees so much evidence of careful planning throughout the universe, he must admit that the world is a purposive whole, a process moving toward perfection. Every phenomenon in it is subject to its own specific criterion, and if a phenomenon appears inexplicable or unjustifiable, this is because of man's shortsightedness. Man must understand that in his finiteness, he lacks the capacity to understand the aims of all phenomena and their content; it is not that creation has any defect.

Our attitude to the bitter and unpleasant occurrences of this world resemble the judgment made by a desert dweller when he comes to the city and sees powerful bulldozers destroying old buildings. He regards this demolition as a foolish act of destruction, but is it logical on his part to think that the demolition is unplanned and purposeless? Of course not, because he sees only the process of demolition, not the calculations and plans of the architects and others involved.

As a certain scientist said: Our state is like that of children who watch a circus packing up and preparing to move on. This is necessary for the circus to go elsewhere and continue with its life of excitement, but those short-sighted children see in the folding of the tents and the comings and goings of men and animals nothing but the dissolution and termination of the circus."

If we look a little more deeply and imaginatively at the misfortunes and disasters that plague man and interpret them correctly, we will appreciate that in reality, they are blessings, not disasters. A blessing being a blessing, and a disaster being a disaster is dependent upon man's reaction to it; a single event may be experienced quite differently by two different people.

Misfortune and pain are like an alarm warning man to remedy his deficiencies and errors; they are like a natural immune system or regulatory mechanism inherent in man.

If wealth leads to self-indulgence and pleasure-seeking, it is a misfortune and a disaster, and if poverty and deprivation lead to the refinement and development of the human soul, they are a blessing. Thus, wealth cannot be counted as absolute good fortune nor poverty as absolute misfortune. A similar rule covers whatever natural gifts man may possess.

Nations who are confronted by various hostile forces and compelled to struggle for their survival are strengthened thereby. Once we regard effort and struggle to be a positive and constructive endeavor, we cannot overlook the role played by hardships in developing man's inner resources and impelling him to progress.

People who are not obliged to struggle and who live in an environment free of all contradiction will easily be immersed by material prosperity in their pleasures and lusts.

How often it happens that someone willingly endures hardship and pain for the sake of a great goal! Were it not for that hardship and pain, the goal might not appear so desirable to him! A smooth path along which one advances blindly and mechanically is not conducive to development and growth, and a human effort from which the element of conscious will has been removed cannot produce a fundamental change in man.

Struggle and contradiction are like a scourge impelling man forward. Solid objects are shattered by the pressure of repeated blows, but men are formed and tempered by the hardships they endure. They throw themselves into the ocean to learn how to swim, and it is in the furnace of crisis that genius emerges.

Unconcealed self-indulgence, love of the world, unrestricted pleasure-seeking, heedlessness of higher goals all these are indications of misguidance and lack of awareness. In fact, the most wretched of men are those who have grown up in the midst of luxury and comfort, who have never experienced the

hardships of life or tasted its bitter days along with the sweet the sun of their lives rises and sets within, unnoticed by anyone else.

Following one's inclinations and adhering to one's desires is incompatible with firmness and elevation of spirit, with purposeful effort and striving. Pleasure-seeking and corruption, on the one hand, and strength of will and purposiveness, on the other, represent two contrary inclinations in man. Since neither can be negated or affirmed to the exclusion of the other, one must strive constantly to reduce the desire for pleasure and strengthen the opposing force within one.

Those who have been raised in luxury, who have never tasted the bitter and sweet days of the world, who have always enjoyed prosperity and never endured hunger—they can never appreciate the taste of delicious food nor the joy of life as a whole and they are incapable of truly appreciating beauty. The pleasures of life can be truly enjoyed only by those who have experienced hardship and failure in their lives, who have the capacity to absorb difficulty and to endure those hardships that lie in wait along every step of man's path.

Material and spiritual ease become precious to man only after experiencing the ups and downs of life and the pressure of its unpleasant incidents.

Once man is preoccupied with his material life, all dimensions of his existence are enchained, and he loses aspiration and motion. Inevitably, he will also neglect his eternal life and inward purification. As long as desire casts its shadow on his being and his soul is ensnared by darkness, he will be like a speck tossed around on the waves of matter. He will seek refuge in anything but God.

He therefore needs something to awaken him and induce maturity in his thoughts, to remind him of the transiency of this ephemeral world and help him attain the ultimate aim of all heavenly teachings—the freedom of the soul from all the obstacles and carriers that prevent man from attaining lofty perfection.

The training and refinement of the self is not to be had cheaply; it requires the renunciation of various pleasures and enjoyments, and the process of cutting loose from them is bitter and difficult.

It is true that such exertions will be for the sake of purifying man's inner being and allowing his latent capacities to appear. Nonetheless, patient abstention from sin and pleasure-seeking is always bitter to man's taste and it is only through obstinate resistance to lower impulses that he can fulfill his mission of breaking down the barriers that confront him and thus ascend to the realm of higher values.

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