

# IS GOD MERCIFUL? ISLAM'S RESPONSE TO EVIL & SUFFERING (PART 3 OF 5)

## Rating:

**Description:** The problem of evil has troubled humankind since time immemorial. This article gives the Islamic perspective on it in a simple and logical way. Part 3: Some lessons from the story of Moses and Khidr.

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In addition to contrasting our limited wisdom with God's, this story also provides key lessons and spiritual insights. The first lesson is that in order to understand God's will, one has to be humble. Moses approached Khidr, and knew that he had some Divinely inspired knowledge that God had not given to Moses. Moses humbly asked to learn from him, yet Khidr responded by questioning his ability to be patient; nevertheless, Moses insisted and wanted to learn. (The spiritual status of Moses is very high according to the Islamic tradition. He was a prophet and messenger, yet he approached the man with humility.)

The second lesson is that patience is required to emotionally and psychologically deal with the suffering and evil in the world. Khidr knew that Moses would not be able to be patient with him, as he was going to do things that Moses thought were evil. Moses tried to be patient but always questioned the man's actions and expressed his anger at the perceived evil. However, at the end of the story, Khidr explained the Divine wisdom behind his actions after exclaiming that Moses was not able to be patient. What we learn from this story is that to be able to deal with evil and suffering in the world, including our inability to understand it, we must be humble and patient.



Commenting on the above verses, the classical scholar Ibn Kathir explained that Khidr was the one to whom God had given knowledge of the reality behind the perceived evil and suffering, and He had not given it to Moses. With reference to the statement "You will not be able to bear with me patiently", Ibn Kathir writes that this means: "You will not be able to accompany with me when you see me doing things that go against your law, because I have knowledge from God that He has not taught you, and you have knowledge from God that He has not taught me."<sup>[1]</sup>

In essence, God's wisdom is unbounded and complete, whereas we have limited wisdom and knowledge. Another way of putting it is that God has the totality of wisdom and knowledge; we just have its particulars. We see things from the perspective of our fragmentary viewpoint. To fall for the trap of egocentrism is like believing you know the entire puzzle after seeing only one piece. Hence Ibn Kathir explains that the verse "How could you be patient in matters beyond your knowledge?" means that there is a Divine wisdom that we cannot access: "For I know that you will denounce me justifiably, but I have knowledge of God's wisdom and the hidden interests which I can see but you cannot."<sup>[2]</sup>

The view that everything that happens is in line with a Divine wisdom is empowering and positive. This is because God's wisdom does not contradict other aspects of His nature, such as His perfection and goodness. Therefore, evil and suffering are ultimately part of a Divine purpose. Among many other classical scholars, the 14<sup>th</sup> century scholar Ibn Taymiyya summarises this point well: "God does not create pure evil. Rather, in everything that He creates is a wise purpose by virtue of what is good. However, there may be some evil in it for some people, and this is partial, relative evil. As for total evil or absolute evil, the Lord is exonerated of that."<sup>[3]</sup>

This does not negate the concept of objective moral truths. Even if everything is in line with ultimate goodness, and evil is 'partial', it does not undermine the concept of objective evil. Objective evil is not the same as absolute evil, rather it is evil based on a particular context or set of variables. So something can be objectively evil due to certain variables or context, and at the same time it can be included with an ultimate Divine purpose that is good and wise.

This evokes positive psychological responses from believers because all the evil and all the suffering that occur are for a Divine purpose. Ibn Taymiyya summarises this point as well: "If God—exalted is He—is Creator of everything, He creates good and evil on account of the wise purpose that He has in that by virtue of which His action is good and perfect."<sup>[4]</sup>

Henri Laoust in his *Essay sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Taki-d-Din Ahmad b. Taimiya*, also explains this position: "God is essentially providence. Evil is without real existence in the world. All that God has willed can only conform to a sovereign justice and an infinite goodness, provided, however, that it is envisaged from the point of view of the totality and not from that of the fragmentary and imperfect knowledge that His creatures have of reality...."<sup>[5]</sup>

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#### Footnotes:

<sup>[1]</sup> Ibn Kathir, I. (1999) Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Atheem. Vol 5, p. 181.

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid.

[3] Ibn Taymiyyah, A. (2004) Majmu' al-Fatawa Shaykhul Islam Ahmad bin Taymiyyah. Vol 14, p. 266.

[4] Ibn Taymiyyah, A. (1986) Minhaj al-Sunnah. Edited by Muhammad Rashad Salim. Riyadh: Jami'ah al-Imam Muhammad bin Saud al-Islamiyah. Vol 3, p142.

[5] Cited in Hoover, J. (2007) Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism. Leiden: Brill, p.4.

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