

# Is God Merciful? Islam's Response to Evil & Suffering (Part 4 of 5)

**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 4: Some of the reasons God has given for the existence of evil.

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## Does God give us reasons for why He has allowed evil and suffering to exist?

A sufficient response to the second assumption is to provide a strong argument that God has communicated some reasons to us about why He has allowed evil and suffering in the world. The intellectual richness of Islamic thought provides us with many reasons.



### ***Our purpose is worship***

The primary purpose of the human being is not to enjoy a transitory sense of happiness; rather, it is to achieve a deep internal peace through knowing and worshipping God. This fulfilment of the Divine purpose will result in everlasting bliss and true happiness. So, if this is our primary purpose, other aspects of human experience are secondary. The Qur'an states, "**I did not create either *jinn* [spirit world] or man except to worship Me.**" (Qur'an 51:56)

Consider someone who has never experienced any suffering or pain, but experiences pleasure all the time. This person, by virtue of his state of ease, has forgotten God and therefore failed to do what he was created to do. Compare this person with someone whose experiences of hardship and pain have led him to God, and fulfilled his purpose in

life. From the perspective of the Islamic spiritual tradition, the one whose suffering has led him to God is better than the one who has never suffered and whose pleasures have led him away from God.

### ***Life is a test***

God also created us for a test, and part of this test is to experience trials with suffering and evil. Passing the test facilitates our permanent abode of eternal bliss in paradise. The Qur'an explains that God created death and life, **"so that He may put you to test, to find out which of you is best in deeds: He is the The-Almighty, The-Forgiving."** (Qur'an 67:2)

On a basic level, the atheist misunderstands the purpose of our existence on Earth. The world is supposed to be an arena of trials and tribulations in order to test our conduct and for us to cultivate virtue. For example, how can we cultivate patience if we do not experience things that test our patience? How can we become courageous if there are no dangers to be confronted? How can we be compassionate if no one is in need of it? Life being a test answers these questions. We need them to ensure our moral and spiritual growth. We are not here to party; that is the purpose of paradise.

So why is life a test? Since God is perfectly good, He wants every single one of us to believe and as a result to experience eternal bliss with Him in paradise. God makes it clear that He prefers belief for us all: **"And He does not approve for His servants disbelief."** (Qur'an 39:7)

This clearly shows that God does not want anyone to go to hell. However, if He were to enforce that and send everyone to paradise, then a gross violation of justice would take place; God would be treating Moses and the Pharaoh and Hitler and Jesus as the same. A mechanism is needed to ensure that people who enter paradise do so based on merit. This explains why life is a test. Life is just a mechanism to see who among us are truly deserving of eternal happiness. As such, life is filled with obstacles, which act as tests of our conduct.

In this regard, Islam is extremely empowering because it sees suffering, evil, harm, pain and problems as a test. We can have fun, but we have been created with a purpose and that purpose is to worship God. The empowering Islamic view is that tests are seen as sign of God's love. The Prophet Muhammad, may God's peace and blessings be upon him, said, "When God loves a servant, He tests him."[\[1\]](#)

The reason God tests those whom He loves is because it is an avenue to achieve the eternal bliss of paradise"and entering paradise is a result of Divine love and mercy. God points this out clearly in the Qur'an: **"Do you suppose that you will enter the Garden without first having suffered like those before you? They were afflicted by misfortune and hardship, and they were so shaken that even [their] messenger and the believers with him cried, 'When will God's help arrive?' Truly, God's help is near."** (Qur'an 2:214)

The beauty of the Islamic tradition is that God, who knows us better than we know

ourselves, has already empowered us and tells us that we have what it takes to overcome these trials. **"God does not burden any soul with more than it can bear."** (Qur'an 2:286)

However, if we cannot overcome these trials after having tried our best, God's mercy and justice will ensure that we are recompensed in some way, either in this life or the eternal life that awaits us.

### ***Knowing God***

Having hardship and suffering enables us to realise and know God's attributes, such as The-Protector and The-Healer. For example, without the pain of illness we would not appreciate the attribute of God being The-Healer, or the one who gives us health. Knowing God in the Islamic spiritual tradition is a greater good, and worth the experience of suffering or pain, as it will ensure the fulfilment of our primary purpose, which ultimately leads to paradise.

### ***Greater good***

Suffering and evil allow a greater good, also known as second-order good. First-order good is physical pleasure and happiness, and first-order evil is physical pain and sadness. Some examples of second-order goodness include courage, humility and patience. However, in order to have a second-order good (like courage) there must be a first-order evil (like cowardice). According to the Qur'an, elevated good such as courage and humility do not have the same value as evil: **"Say Prophet, bad cannot be likened to good, though you may be dazzled by how abundant the bad is. Be mindful of God, people of understanding, so that you may prosper."** (Qur'an 5:100)

### ***Free will***

God has given us free will, and free will includes choosing evil acts. This explains personal evil, which is evil or suffering committed by a human being. One can ask: *why has God given us free will at all?* In order for the tests in life to be meaningful, there must be free will. An exam is pointless if the student is obligated or forced to answer correctly on each question. Similarly, in the exam of life, human beings must be given adequate freedom to do as they please.

Good and evil lose their meaning if God were to always ensure we chose good. Take the following example into consideration: someone points a loaded gun to your head and asks you to give charity. You give the money, but does it have any moral value? It does not, for it only has value if a free agent chooses to do so.

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Endnotes:

[\[1\]](#) *Tirmidhi*

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