

## 1.6 Divine Attributes (Forgiveness)

**Let's move to a more human level. How does the closeness of Allah relate to me? There are two dimensions or implications to this: the first is when I need Him I reach out to Him and the second is when I sin and need forgiveness I reach out to Him. Can you please take those two implications and separately discuss them. Also, how close is God to the human being?**

I think the word 'close' is very expressive. Many have asked me if I thought of God as a personal God or someone 'up there' and how personal my relationship with God is. As I said, the word 'close' is very expressive because that is the exact term used in the Qur'an about the relationship between Allah and a person who is trying to be pious and is trying to reach out for Him.

In chapter 50 verse 16 it reads, "It was We Who created man, and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein." The Qur'an directly states that God is closer to us than our very own jugular vein. There is no more noble a way to express the closeness of Allah, the Creator, to His beloved creatures.

A simple nomad came to Prophet Mohammed (may peace and blessings be upon him) and in the simplicity and innocence of a desert man, he said, "O messenger of Allah, tell me, is God close enough so that we may have private discourse with Him and pray to Him even in secrecy or is He far away so that we'd have to call out to Him so that He can hear us?" The prophet (peace be upon him) did not know how to answer this simple question.

Soon afterwards, however, he received a revelation. The Qur'an says in response to the nomad's question, "When My servants ask you (Mohammed) concerning Me, I am indeed close to them: I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calls on Me: Let them also, with a will, Listen to My call, and believe in Me: That they may walk in the right way." (2:186)

I have not heard of any faith on the face of the earth that has a practice that parallels Islam as far as manifesting and expressing this close and direct relationship between man and God. Take the five daily prayers as an example. When I say prayer, I am not using the limited sense of

supplication. Instead, I am talking about the specific steps in doing the five prayers from doing ablution to the specific movements (bowing to God, recitation of the Qur'an, etc) that constitute prayer.

As I said I don't know of any faith that provides as much direct relationship with God as the prayer provides for Muslims. This is something you would have to really experience in order to fully appreciate it. Making ablution, standing facing the Kabba (the first house on earth built for the worship of God built by prophet Abraham), starting the prayer in full devotion and humility, reciting verses, virtually talking to Allah. You do not see Him in front of you in a physical sense, but you see Him in your heart and you communicate with Him, you supplicate to Him. There is no intermediary. There is no one is regarded as an intermediary between man and God; not even the Prophet Mohammed himself or any of the other prophets (may peace and blessings be upon them).

This relationship between mankind and Allah is the most direct and noble type. In the history of the Prophet Mohammed and his followers, you'll find that they spent portions of the night praying, in earnest, feeling so joyful (and focused on the connection with Allah) that they would forget the world around them. I do not know what could be more close and noble than not only this citation in the Qur'an but also the practice of a devout Muslim in his direct, close and personal relationship with Allah.

**Let's move to the other dimension, the dimension of forgiveness. Now forgiveness is such a wide and rich concept. Can you break it down for us? I want to start, however, with the idea of original sin because that is a very important concept in the west and I would like you to relate it to the Islamic concept. How does Islam view the idea of original sin and what are the repercussions and implications of it?**

If using the term original sin then the answer is different. If asking about sinning in general then of course you would say that Islam says that we are sinful as human beings and that we should find ways of retribution for those sins. We will discuss this point later on.

When we use the term 'original sin,' I suppose you are referring to the Judea-Christian tradition. Before we make any comparisons let us see

what the position the Judea-Christian tradition holds concerning the original sin and then compare it to Islam.

The idea of original sin is of when Adam and Eve committed their first act of disobedience towards God by eating (the fruit) from the forbidden tree. By necessity, this original sin would be inherited by all their decedents and so they are condemned. The only way for mankind to attain forgiveness is through reconciling God's justice and mercy. According to some, because God is merciful He wanted to forgive Adam and Eve, but since He is also just He wanted to punish them. So there seems to be a conflict (in the mind of God) between His mercy and His justice. To reconcile the conflict, He must sacrifice blood and that blood must combine humanity and divinity. The theological claim is made that Jesus is the only person who is both divine and human. By believing in him, his blood atones for the sins of humanity.

The fact that Adam and Eve committed an act of disobedience is similar between the biblical presentation and Islam. The Qur'an mentions that they committed that disobedience. However, there are five basic reasons why there is no concept of the original sin in Islam.

The first reason is that Allah created human kind. When He created us, He knew we were made of material and spirit. As the story goes He created mankind from clay, whether it's from the literal sense or the sense of having the same elements that you find in clay on earth and as such we know that we are part material and part spiritual. They are intermingling components of our existence. God knows that as humans we are malleable, we are sinful, and we are imperfect. However, our malleability and our sinfulness should not be equated with criminality. This does not mean that we are criminal, hopeless and that there is no way for us to make up for our mistakes.

Why then would Allah condemn the entire human race because of a weakness that Adam and Eve befell?

The second reason why Muslims do not accept the original sin doctrine is that the Qur'an makes it very clear that Adam and Eve, after committing the mistake realized it for a mistake and actually earnestly prayed to God for forgiveness. The Qur'an specifically says, "They said: "Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls: If you forgive us not and bestow not upon us your Mercy, we shall certainly be lost" (7:23). Both, Adam and Eve, prayed for forgiveness. Additionally, it is interesting to notice that the

terminology used in the Qur'an does not put the blame for that sin on Eve. In fact, the Qur'an uses the term for both, that both of them repented. Adam and Eve asked for forgiveness and Adam and Eve were both forgiven, in other words it blamed both of them. In fact, it's also interesting to note that in one verse in the Qur'an the blame is directed to Adam. It doesn't mean that Eve didn't take part in the disobedience but it shows that there is no theology in Islam that blames women for the fall of Adam as exists elsewhere.

We should realize that the sin does not really deaden our heart or close the door for reform and moral growth.

The third reason for the inability to accept this doctrine is that Allah is both just and merciful. According to the Qur'an, the mercy of Allah far exceeds his justice. It's not a matter of if one commits a sin then no matter how much one repents and prays for forgiveness then s/he will still be punished for it at the same level as one who commits the sin and doesn't repent. Allah's mercy supersedes all. The passage we cited in the previous program sums it up: "My mercy encompasses everything."

From the Muslim point of view, how is it that God, knowing our weakness and listening to the supplication and sincere prayers of Adam and Eve, refuses to forgive them unless blood is shed and specially the blood of an innocent and great man like Prophet Jesus (peace be upon him)? Why can't God forgive, if He has the full authority and power to grant forgiveness?

The Qur'an leads us to the fourth reason. It says explicitly that Adam and Eve not only prayed for forgiveness but also that they were forgiven *before* they were sent to live on earth. The Qur'an says, "Then learnt Adam from his Lord words of inspiration, and his Lord turned towards him; for He is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful" (2:37).

A similar verse can be found in the Qur'an in chapter 21 in the 22<sup>nd</sup> verse, which gives the same impression that God had already forgiven Adam and Eve.

Finally, another important reason, why Muslims do not believe in original sin, is that the original sin, as a doctrine, assumes the inheritance of the sin. Even though Adam and Eve did it, everyone, until the Day of Judgment, carries the stigma of that sin. This is not the case according to the Qur'an: "No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another" (53:

38) Therefore, sins do not pass on to others. No one can carry the sin or pay for the sin of others. Everyone stands on his or her own feet. The chapter continues "That human can have nothing but what s/he strives for; That (the fruit of) his/her striving will soon come in sight: Then will s/he be rewarded with a reward complete" (53: 39-41).

This does not necessarily mean that we are saved only by our deeds. This would be human arrogance. Definitely we are also saved by the grace of God. However, according to the Qur'an we have to earn this 'grace,' which can only be earned by those who show sincerity and turn in earnest towards Allah.

In fact, Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) echoed this concept when he said, in one of his sayings, that every child is born innocent and pure. No one is born with original sin. His exact wording is "every child or infant is born pure and innocent as the white cloth." It is what he makes of himself later on and what doctrine he gets, which makes him turn to good or turn to bad. Initially there is no sin to be inherited.

**Let's move to the next dimension of forgiveness that comes from one of the points you had mentioned. If Adam and Eve were forgiven, why were they sent to earth? Many think that they were sent to live on earth as a punishment to make up or atone for their sins.**

It may appear that Adam and Eve were sent to live on earth because of that mistake and, therefore, being here is a punishment. According to Islam, we are not living on earth as a punishment for Adam and Eve's sin.

In fact, the Qur'an says that Allah told the angels, before he created Adam and Eve, that He had created earth. Specifically God says to the angels, "I will create a vicegerent (trustee) on earth " (2:30). This means that Adam and Eve were destined to live on earth even before they were created.

Now a question might arise, as to why they were kept in the Garden of Eden or paradise before they came to earth. The way I understand this, as a Muslim, is that they needed to learn the consequence of obedience and disobedience to Allah before living on earth. So they learned their lesson before coming to earth.

In conclusion, we are not on earth as punishment; we should not have this stigma of paying for that sin. We are here to accomplish a very noble task, which the Qur'an describes as being the trustees of our Creator on earth.

**Let's move to the idea of repentance, which is the heart and soul of forgiveness. First of all, does the concept of repentance exist in Islam and what are its dimensions? How does a person repent in Islam? Do we need confessionals? Do we need absolution?**

To start with, confessionals do not exist in Islam whatsoever. A Muslim should not confess except to He who controls the powers of forgiveness, which obviously is Allah alone. No intermediaries, no priesthood, no prophet even or messenger can grant this forgiveness.

As far as the concept of retribution- how you make up and repent for your sins- there are a few conditions regarding repentance.

The first condition is to stop the evil or wrong that is being done. That is considered an advance of good will. The second condition is to feel sorry for what you've done. If you don't feel sorry for what you've done that means you might feel too arrogant to admit the error. Admitting error is not bad- it is moral courage. Thirdly, one should have the sincere intention to not repeat that offense or any other offense again. I'm saying 'sincere intention' because you may intend to never do this mistake again but as you go on your human weakness might pull you back into it. At least, at the time of making repentance you have the determination of not going back to the sin again. The fourth condition, which may or may not be applicable, is when the sin involves encroachment on the rights of others then the repentance cannot be accepted unless the rights are returned to those who have been infringed upon.

For example, if I stole something from you or take away some of your rights, I cannot really say I'm sincerely repenting unless I return your full due rights.

"Proclaim! O Mohammed to My servants that I am indeed the Oftforgiving, Most Merciful; And that My Penalty will be indeed the most grievous Penalty."(15:49-50) So we have a choice between the 'grievous penalty' or the wide open door for repentance and forgiveness.

Another passage says, "*Innal hasanat uthhibna al sayyeeat,*" which roughly translates to "For those things that are good (deeds) remove those that are evil (deeds)." In other words, good deeds atone for previous bad deeds. Even if you've committed lots of bad deeds do good and that should take care of the past mistakes.

"Say (Mohammed to the people): 'O My Servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah. For Allah forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. Turn you to our Lord in repentance and bow to His Will, before the Penalty comes on you: after that you shall not be helped.'"(39: 53-54)

"And those who, having done something to be ashamed of, or wronged their own souls, earnestly bring Allah to mind, and ask for forgiveness for their sins, - and who can forgive sins except Allah- and are never obstinate in persisting knowingly in (the wrong) they have done." (3:135) This passage shows one of the characteristics of a true believer.

Allah says in the Qur'an, "But, without doubt, I am (also) He that forgives again and again, to those who repent, believe, and do right, who, - in fine, are ready to receive true guidance."(20:82) It is interesting to note that the word used in this specific passage that relays the term forgiveness is *ghaffar*. And *ghaffar* is different from the more widely used term *ghaffoor*. *Ghaffar* simply means that He is not only one who forgives but also one who forgives again and again continuously.