

Understanding Religious Consolation in Afflictions

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ABSTRACT

One of the basic human needs in the wake of afflictions is that of consolation. The grief and sorrow from the calamities can endanger human life and shatter his hopes. Thus, humans need to be comforted when overwhelmed by calamities and miseries. The authors aimed to reveal that the universal and eternal religion of Islam has provided appropriate guidelines for consolation. This article uses religious context and descriptive-analytical methodologies to investigate the religious consolation aimed at allaying the suffering and agonies of the affected under pervasive afflictions.

The findings indicate that there are multiple verses and narrations which help increase affliction-stricken people's knowledge of God, the Hereafter, humans, calamities as well as the resulting rewards; in the wake of affliction, belief in the unity of God and the Judgement Day will certainly allay the illusion of annihilation and failure, and comfort the man. This belief prompts him to console others in the light of profound religious truth while striving to satisfy the Lord, also. The religious human, within the scope of monotheistic thinking, shall not consider himself to own anything, either independent from God or in collaboration with Him. The only Face that remains, as he will admit to, is the absolute and all-encompassing face of the Lord, suggesting human's non-ownership. Thus, whatever is lost and to be lost does not belong to non-God beings and shall not be a cause of upsetting for the affliction-stricken individual. Afflictions for the faithful entails benefits, the knowledge of which helps the suffering be alleviated; on the other hand, calamities help the believer compensate for the sins he has committed, as they promote his ranking before God and result in divine affection.

Keywords: religious beliefs understanding afflictions, the injured, religious consolation.

Introduction

Statement of the problem

The material world is a confined, mundane realm that cannot be void of griefs or miseries, and no one is immune from it, even those who enjoy many worldly riches. Imam Ali (AS) states: “The people of the past used to erect high-rise and solid palaces and set festivities with soft pillows on which they drank, thus making graves out of stones and bricks” (Seyyed Razi, 2018, 328).

The subject of afflictions has been debated as good and evil in the works of philosophers and theologians, which provide room for doubts. In this connection, with the Coronavirus spreading across the world, it is imperative to offer our consolation to the affected. The human experience reveals that the apostles and the Imams were more subjected to calamities than others, though they never lost their steadfastness.

Accordingly, the religious context contains appropriate consolation guidelines. When a calamity unfolds, there are many who need consolation. Until now, there may have been no calamity that affected the world as Corona has. Thus, research on consoling the affected under such an intense affliction using religious scripture may be very critical.

With numerous subjects available on consolation in narrations, there is no independent research on consoling the affected as this present article. This descriptive and analytical article aims to discover ways to apply religious consolation in the wake of spreading miseries. To arrive at this, more effective theological subjects will be examined in this regard.

Concept of consolation

Consolation denotes assuaging and allaying the grief, sorrow, and discomfort of the affected (Ibn Manzoor, 1995:14, 294; Moein, 2005, 1, 794). Broadly speaking, consolation is comforting the affected and removing the griefs of the affected by uttering consoling words or writing condolence letters (Ibid, 195, 2, 152; Moein, 2005, 1, 794). In fact, consolation, consolement, and solace are terms referring to psychological comfort given to someone who has suffered severe, upsetting loss, such as the death of a loved one. It is typically provided by expressing shared regret for that loss and highlighting the hope for positive events in the future.

The Koran also refers to afflictions as both grief and test, when God mentions pharaoh’s suppressive conducts to mean grief and calamity:

[Remember] when We delivered you from Pharaoh’s clan who inflicted a terrible torment on you, and slaughtered your sons and spared your women, and in that, there was a great test from your Lord (Baghareh, 49).

Or when God mentions afflictions to mean test:

It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days—and His Throne was [then] upon the waters—that He may test you [to see] which of you is best in conduct (Houd, 7).

We read from narrations that: God created the heavens and the earth in six days, and He tests you, lest no one shall conceive that God punishes His servants for what He already knows. (Tousi, n.d. 5, 451).

Widespread afflictions such as Coronavirus engulf people and overwhelm many countries. This research refers to afflictions to mean griefs and calamities.

Understanding religious consolation

Religious consolation is achieved by acquiring religious knowledge. Those who are consoled from religious knowledge and faith need to go to the affected and alleviate their grief through faithful assistance. The following incorporates factors that help console the affliction-stricken people.

1. Knowledge of the Lord and its relation with consolation (Knowledge of God)

Consolation and its manners, being one of the most important issues in the wake of calamities, will not be made unless with knowledge of God. Thus, failure to know God could add to the griefs and sorrows from calamities. Afflictions help know the Lord themselves. When a man is exposed to perils and loses hope in everything, he turns to God. God describes this:

When they board the ship, they invoke Allah putting exclusive faith in Him, but when He delivers them to land, behold, they ascribe partners [to Him] (Ankabout, 65).

Imam Ali (AS) argues that the unfolding of the decisions and undoing of hard knots, as well as disentanglement of the intentions, are far beyond the human's decisions over which man has no power. He admonishes people to turn to God and says: We believed in God when strong wills were loosened, hard knots were undone, and decisions were unfolded (Seyed Razi, 2018, 486).

This epistemological manner suggests that the Lord is the absolute owner and commander of all affairs. He is the one who can transform strong wills, and He is the omnipotent and all-encompassing Creator of the universe and mankind. Therefore, one should not be offended by the decision and manipulation of the absolute authority in his realms. On the other hand, God is always benevolent and does not need to oppress; as a consequence, divine afflictions will be useful.

2. Understanding the human's spiritual aspect (Knowledge of humans)

The faithful are either directly or indirectly affected by afflictions, e.g., a family directly struggles to cope with a calamity, and the believers feel uncomfortable about that.

The reason why the believers are affected by the grief and upsetting of each other and strive to console the affected is that the souls of the faithful are interwoven, with the believers' souls being strongly associated with Lord. The divine ownership relationship with and his domination over the faithful's souls through the so-called single-cause or the cause of the causes, on the one hand, and the faithful's spiritual association with each other, on the other hand, could affect their souls.

Imam Sadegh states: The faithful are like organs of a body interlinked. The aching of one organ hurts the other". He also adds, "The faithful have a similar soul for it originated from the single divine soul (Kolini, 1995, 2, 166; Majlesi, Ibid, 74, 268).

The souls of religious brothers originate from the divine soul as the faithful's link with God's is stronger than the link between the solar light and the sun itself. The faithful considers his brother to be a ray of the divine soul and venerates him for good, as he shares condolence for the brother's griefs, also. Ali Ibn Hossein (AS) tells Shahab Zahri:

What if you consider the Muslim parts of your own family? What if you regard their elderly as your fathers, their offspring as your offspring, and their peers as your brothers? (Majlisi, Ibid, 71, 230).

The believer, if knows mankind, will learn that the other faithful will cooperate and sympathize with him and his family by the time a calamity unfolds; thus, he becomes hopeful at their assistance relieves him of the griefs and upsetting. On the other hand, the faithful, who have been offended by the latter's calamity, will attempt to allay his discomfort.

3. Understanding servitude (lessons of servitude)

Humans will inevitably see the hand of the providence when faced with calamities and see no choice but to submit to it. This is where he sees the divine will governing over him. Unvan Basri went to Imam Sadegh and demanded that he give him some knowledge. The Imam said:

Knowledge is not achieved by much learning or teaching; knowledge is the light God bestows on His servants' hearts. If you seek knowledge, you need to seek the very truth of servitude in your own essence and ask for knowledge and practice from God. You need to ask God for understanding. Basri asked: What is the truth of servitude? The Imam replied: It is three things: first, do not consider yourself the owner of whatever God has granted you; second, do not consider yourself the lord of yourself and think your intelligence has helped you achieve this; and third, do not ignore the divine prohibitions for the sake of accepting the decrees (Majlisi, 2003, 1, 252).

The holy Sharia and the common sense are well-coordinated; the former never reverse the latter; rather, the holy Sharia can also be conceived of by the intellect, which is essentially preferred. Muslim scholars have thought to unveil the very coordination between religion and philosophy. Molla Sadra condemns the philosophy which opposes the Book and the Traditions (Molla Sadra, 1980, 8, 303).

To better understand the words of Imam Sadegh, it is required to rationally substantiate them as follows:

The path to achieving servitude requires reasoning, and the first step in this direction is to substantiate the non-ownership of non-God beings. The following indicates the relationship between the servant and the Lord:

First: Ownership in the relation between the servant and God is made in collaboration.

Second: Ownership in the relation between servant and God is inconsistent, and

Third: Ownership in the relation between servant and God suggests the essential divine independence and essential human poverty.

The first case is only conceivable through relation with creatures and God; the Almighty is far above any collaboration or succession. The second case is not consistent with the divine essence, and the third case is the only aspect that is consistent with the monotheistic nature. Man will become in possession of a property when he removes the hand of the latter or his domination over it. This is feasible in relation to possible beings (non-God entities), etc., however, unfeasible in relation with the self-existent (Allah). It is by no means feasible for one to cut off the hand of the universe Creator from his property and assume complete ownership of it.

In Al-Mizan, Allame Tabatabaei is quoted as saying: Human ownership is only allowable at permission. For example, the horse owner is only entitled to use it for mounting; he does not have the right to set it ablaze or kill it off from famine (Tabatabaei, 1992, 1, 94). For him, because poverty and richness originate from loss and conscience, respectively, and are both reciprocally attributed, it is impossible to conceive of something as being void of either one; it is either poor or rich. The reason for poverty in humans and richness in God is derived from another reason, and that is:

Man is surrounded by poverty, while God is full of richness; thus, humans have no choice but to remain poor, and this enables richness in God. The criterion by which God is independent of His servants and their dependence on Him is the fact that God is the Creator and manager of their affairs. This is also interpreted in this way: O' humans, you are poor and needy for you are created by God, and you live in all sorts of poverty and suffering, and God is the rich for He has created you, and there is no one richer than He is (Tabatabaei, 1991, 17, 19).

4. Understanding the Hereafter and its relation with consolation (Knowledge of the Hereafter)

Belief in Judgement Day and in God's no need of oppressing His servants could help assuage those affected by the suffering. If a man thinks death will finish off his life and those of his beloved, he will forfeit any hope in the wake of calamities. The believer in God's providence could understand the necessity of life after death and consider the unfolding of calamities from God to be useful for his life. Because the Lord does not do things in vain and issue void commands, the belief in the Hereafter will help the calamity-stricken people to receive their rewards in the day to come. The faithful believe that his Lord will bestow His servants more than what he did in the mundane world. He also puts his faith in God and understands that the Lord will make up for any damages as He is attributed "Jabbar," literally translating to Compensator. The outcome of this conviction could make it easier to withstand agonies and suffering.

5. Understanding the world and its relation with consolation (Knowledge of the world)

Understanding the world and its characteristics helps tolerate calamities and console the suffered. We are living in a world where calamities and comfort are interwoven, a world with no permanent grief and happiness. Imam Ali (AS) states: "The world is a house fraught with calamities, afflictions, and deceptions whose states are not stable nor are its people healthy. It involves various states and transformations where life is doomed to failure and security is tarnished. The people in it are always targeted by a variety of suffering and agonies exposed to annihilation by death" (Seyyed Razi, 2018, 328). In this world, no one is shielded from suffering as we have to cross it over like the ones who abandoned it.

The one who aspires for permanent comfort and solace must abandon it and think of the Heavens because it is only in the Heavens where there is no grief. Thus, we need to wait in the wake of calamities and hasten to assist the affected, as this will provide a saving for the day to come.

6. Understanding the impacts of consolation

No happiness will remain forever, as everyone will be hit by the scourge of the miseries one day. Afflictions will darken happy hearts. It is our duty to make the bereaved hearts happy again; making hearts happy will not only bring about rewards in the Hereafter but also alleviate griefs and sorrow from the minds. Imam Ali (AS) says: “Hearts will only be made happy with the kindness God creates; when one suffers from a misery, his kindness will be directed at that misery and it is alleviated” (Amadi, 2005, 1, 516).

7. Understanding divine tests

Now that we have learned that the truth behind servitude lies with the mystic’s knowledge as being created by God and understanding that the created servant does not own anything and cannot accomplish success in any area unless, with His permission, it turns to divine test. God describes the quality of the test as follows:

We will surely test you with a measure of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth, lives, and fruits; and give good news to the patient (Bagharah, 155).

The divine test is a hard one that is taken in the action field. The loss of wealth, disease, loss of life, loss of properties is all divine tests. This test shows who will pass and who will be rejected. Those who pass it have strong belief and faith in the fact that only God is the owner and others are created by God; thus, the way the true owner manipulates with His properties is rightful and wise. Those who passed the test are characterized by their patience and steadfastness. Thus, the patient is those who passed the divine test, and God describes them as follows:

—those who, when an affliction visits them, say, ‘Indeed we belong to Allah and to Him do we indeed return.’ (Bagharah, 156).

Thus, human ownership is an independent and temporary affair that is changed by God’s will; the pure divine essence, however, transcends transformation; passing the great divine test is the biggest good tidings and highest consolation ever. On the other hand, the Lord is wise and does not do things in vain. Thus, latent in an affliction wisdom which, if recognized, will be easy to tolerate.

8. Understanding the believer’s duty when an affliction unfolds

The believer needs to be patient in the wake of afflictions. When a calamity arises, restiveness and intolerance increase it and eliminates patience (Amadi, 2005, 2043). Man reaches perfection when he understands religion and plans for life. As Kolini puts it: “Perfection is whole consummation” (Kolini, 1986, 1, 32).

The servant is better to be satisfied with the divine ordinance and satisfied with divine providence (Kashani, 2002, 215). Satisfaction has two stages: in the first one, man endeavors to make God please with him, and this is a position that whoever has faith in God aspires to attain; however, the better satisfaction stage is when one is pleased with God. An example of this position is what we saw on the Day of Ashura by the Seyed Al-Shohada, Imam Hossein, when intense thirst and cruel enemy failed to make him surrender as he said, “O’ God, I am pleased with your pleasure.”

We need to meet divine pleasure, for He is the absolute owner and commander. Because He is rich and needs nothing from His servants, the ordinance is not oppression. Thus, we have to put our faith in His providence and thank Him.

9. Understanding afflictions and their benefits for the believers

Understanding calamities and afflictions is critical in today’s world. If people learn about afflictions, they can prevent more damages. Afflictions are torments for the unbeliever but mercy for the believer. The prophet (PBUH) says: “Whoever recognizes afflictions shall be patient with it and whoever fails to recognize shall consider it unhappy” (Mohammad Rey-Shahri, 2006, 2, 188). Affliction awakens the believer and helps him explore himself. Imam Sadegh says: “The believer shall not spend forty nights unless gripped with a sorrow” (Ibid, 55).

Credible narratives suggest that calamities are considered to be divine blessings, means to comfort the believers, signs of divine dignity, symbol of divine affection, cause of believer’s promotion, the atonement

of the believer's sins, etc. The least impacts of recognizing calamities are that it blocks their intensification. Calamity intensifies when the calamity-stricken fails to recognize it and wastes the pertinent rewards by remaining restive and feeling impatience. Loss of the reward from tolerating afflictions is, by itself, another affliction. Imam Kazem states: "Calamity is one for the patient but two for the impatient" (Ibid, 189). It is not meant that humans should not seek the cure. Recognizing afflictions is important in that many of which can be warded off. They should be recognized and be repelled. Imam Ali says: "Many of the calamities can be kept off, and one should be patient against them" (Ibid, 188).

A history of human life indicates that the believer is also afflicted with calamities; perhaps the closest friends of God are subjected to afflictions most. On the other hand, divine justice requires rewarding the calamity-stricken people. That the faithful will also be affected by calamities and God has a special blessing for him, the suffering believer shall be relieved and be consoled. The following also describes the benefits of afflictions.

9.1. Affliction as a cause of the believer's spiritual development

God rewards His faithful servants and bestows on them the highest spiritual perfections. One of these perfections is purity which is a secret of divine secrets that teems up the faithful's hearts. The absolute owner of my being makes the purity-seeking servant pure for Himself. This is what preoccupies the believer with himself. This is what prevents others from entering into his privy with God without permission. Imam Sadegh says: "God the Almighty has servants on the earth who are pure. He shall not descend down from the heavens to the earth anything unless the faithful are bereaved from it, and no calamity unless they are affected with it" (Majlisi, Ibid, 67, 207, 7).

The pure servant of God is happy with whatever God has sent down on him. The prophet (PBUH) says: "The Lord feeds His servants with afflictions as a mother breastfeeds her child" (Mohamad Rey-Shahri, 2006, 2, 53). The suffered faithful shall become hardened steel in the wake of disasters. Man falls in love with the sole true beloved, and since he considers Him to be his Lord, he believes that whatever will be, will be. The lover whose body is filled with divine affection has his mind and soul free from anything except for Him and entrusts his life to the one who is his absolute custodian.

9.2. Affliction as God's goodwill to His faithful servant

According to Islamic teachings, God is the absolute owner of His servants and likes them. If the servant keeps on friendship with God, He shall never forsake him.

*If you desire the beloved not to abandon you
Keep on friendship with Him (Hafez, 2005, 138).*

The fruit of this friendship is faith in divine benevolence. Because God is always well-wishing of His servants, whatever the servants receive from God will be deemed wise and good. He is more aware of His servant's well-wishing than he is. The faithful servant is also pleased with divine providence and entrusts all the affairs to Him. He will thank God for the mercy he receives from Him, and if encounters with a calamity, it'll be considered well-wishing and remains steadfast.

Imam Sadegh narrates God's words with prophet Moses (AS): "I like no one more than my faithful servant for I shall afflict him with calamities because that is better for him; I shall make him recover because it is better for him; I shall take from him and bereave him because that is better for him; I know what is better for my servant, so he should remain steadfast against the calamity he faces and thank me for the blessing I have offered to him; he should be pleased with my providence to consider him among my truthful servants" (Mohammadi Rey-Shahri, 2006, 2, 65).

*One receives agony, the other cure
One pleases with consummation, the other parting
I shall accept from among the agony cure, consummation, and parting
The one which is accepted by the Lover
(Baba Taher, 2006, 28).*

9.3. Calamity as the atonement of the believer's sins

Another way of consoling the faithful is to make them aware that afflictions will remove their sins, as a friend of the Household will meet God when he has no sin. Imam Ali (AS) states: "There is no one in our community whom we have barred from making a sin and shall not die unless affected with a calamity against which he has endured hardships to get his sins cleansed. This calamity will grip him either in his properties or in his life as our friends meet God when he has made no sins, and if he has some sins remained, he shall be treated harshly by the time of death, so he allays those sins, also. Our Shia fiend shall die as a truthful and a martyr, for he affirmed our commands and considered us as the axis of friendship and animosity between himself and others, aiming to please God and his prophet" (Harrani, 2005, 203).

Another consoling conduct is a pleasure with divine providence.

9.4. Calamity as a sign of divine affection to the believer

Some people think the reason why a believer is afflicted with a calamity is that God has released the string of His affection on which also makes the affected suffer more in the wake of a calamity and he thus becomes hated in the eyes of people. This is unwise thinking. After Imam Hossein was martyred, Yazid told Imam Sajjad (AS): "You got yourselves in calamity and cited the verse *"Whatever affliction that may visit you is because of what your hands have earned, and He excuses many [an offense of yours]"* (Shura, 30). Imam Zein Al-Abidin stated: "We are not meant by this verse," as God says: "No calamity hurts your lives or properties unless written prior to the creation" (Mohammadi Rey-Shahri, 2007, 2, 63). God likes the prophet's household more than anyone else, and that's why he increases their agonies and suffering more than others, in so much as Imam Hossein saw his six-month baby dying before his eyes. These calamities were signs of the highest divine affection as the Imams have indicated that suffering goes to the friends of God.

Whoever is close to God than others

Shall receive a cup of suffering

The Prophet (PBUH) said: "Whenever God loves a servant, He shall afflict him with a calamity, and if he loves him very much, He shall kill him. He was asked how he would kill him. He said: "He shall not bereave of him any wealth or children" (Mohammadi Rey-Shahri, 2007, 2, 58). God tests His pure servants with calamities and gives them the highest rewards. Accordingly, the one who receives calamity does not lose, but the one who has been away from the calamity has lost.

O' heart, do not twist in the hairs

For you shall see heads decapitated without offenses

(Hafez, 2005, 65).

Conclusion

The best way to console the affected is religious consolation. Islam announces that God is the absolute owner. The truth behind servitude is that man does not consider himself to be in possession of anything. When man discovers he owns nothing and it is God who manipulates his affairs, he shall not be concerned and remain steadfast.

God tests His own servants and afflicts them with loss of property and even life; if they remain steadfast and announce that God is their owner and they shall return to Him, they can pass the test. God shall reward them rightfully. This sort of consolation is the most effective type of consolation. Afflictions also have other advantages which, if recognized, shall assuage the suffering of the affected. Calamities from God to His servants is like a mother breastfeeding her baby to develop. God calls on His servants to return to Him by means of calamities and makes them clean in this way. We already learned that calamities are signs of divine affection to the servants.

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