

Who Needs This Sacrifice?

A well-known verse in the Qur'an says, in speaking of the Day of Judgment, "Then those whose scales weigh heavy with good works will be successful. But those whose scales weigh light will have ruined their souls; in Hell will they abide" (Surah 23 – *al-Mu-minum*, ayat 102,103). According to this verse, on the Day of Judgment, the good works of a person will have to be weightier than his or her evil deeds. But the Qur'an also says, "Ask Allah for His Forgiveness. Truly, Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most-Merciful... Allah promises you Forgiveness from Himself and Bounty, and Allah is All-Sufficient for His creatures' needs, All-Knower" (Surah 2 – *Al-Baqarah*, ayat 199,268). If God truly forgives, it is obviously possible for men's wrong choices and sinful actions to be removed from the scales on the last day.

When the son of Abraham was to die at the hands of his father, Allah, in His goodness, provided a ransom, a ram which was sacrificed instead of the young man. This sacrifice, which is celebrated by Muslims every year during the feast of Adha, prefigured another ransom that God intended to provide, the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. As we have it in the Injeel, Romans 3:24-26:

"For God showed him publicly dying as a sacrifice of reconciliation to be taken advantage of through faith. This was to vindicate his own justice (for in his forbearance, God passed over men's former sins)—to vindicate his justice at the present time, and show that he is upright himself, and that he makes those who have faith in Jesus upright also." (Romans 3:23-26, translation of E.J. Goodspeed)

This is how Allah can be forgiving and merciful, without resembling the corrupt judge who does not uphold the law. The debt of sin has been paid by the one who had no sin, no debt to pay; that one is Jesus, son of Mary, the "pure" son whose birth was announced by the angel.

WHO NEEDS THIS SACRIFICE?

Perhaps you are telling yourself: That is all very nice for those 'bad sinners', those who do not take the straight path. But as for me, I have always done my duty toward God: I never fail to make Salat five times each day; I pay the Zakat; I do not cheat during the month of Ramadan; I even saved money for years in order to do the hajj; I do not eat pork; I have also built

a small mosque. I am confident that I have done enough good works so that the scales will speak in my favor. My sins are minor, and I will not need to have some of them removed from the scales in order to avoid the fire of Hell.

If you reason this way, you are simply wrong. As a matter of fact, if God does not take our sins from the scales of justice, we have absolutely no hope.

WHY THE LAW (OR GOOD WORKS) DO NOT GIVE ANY HOPE TO THE SINNER

The nature of law

If we reflect on the nature of any law, including that of God, we will see that the mental picture of actions placed on a set of scales is a rather incomplete picture of the justice God will administer on the last day. Yes, God will taken into consideration the good and the evil that each person will have done. But it will not merely be a question of determining if the good actions outweigh the evil ones.

Imagine a person who has always respected all the laws of the country where he lives. He has obeyed the speed limits when he was driving, paid his taxes, refrained from stealing and been a model employee. But one day this man gets angry with his neighbor and kills him. He cannot cite the fact that he has obeyed all the other laws to persuade the judge or the jury not to convict him of murder. We have a duty to obey ALL the laws. You can be sentenced to prison, to pay a fine or even to be put to death for violating just one law. Obedience to certain laws does not give us the right to break others that we find difficult or unimportant or that we do not like. If this is true of man-made laws, how much more would it be true of the laws ordained by the Lord of the universe! This is why the Bible says in James 2:10,11:

"For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, 'Do not commit adultery,' also said, 'Do not murder.' Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law."

Laws, by their very nature, condemn those who disobey them. Sin, according to 1 John 3:4, is "the transgression of the law." The function of law is not to excuse or forgive the guilty party. The Gospel tells us in Galatians 3:21,22, "For if a law had been given which

was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin..."

A man must obey all of God's commandments. Suppose that he realizes that he has disobeyed several of them. He resolves to respect all of them in the future. That is good, but we have to recognize two problems:

1) If I abstain from stealing today, that will not take away my guilt for having stolen yesterday and will not enable me to escape punishment for the crime that I have already committed.

2) Suppose that I make the resolution to perfectly obey all of God's commandments from this day forward. That is all very well, but do you think that I will succeed in never committing another sin until the day that I die? Certainly not. Thus, not only will my future obedience not take away my past sins, but, because my obedience will always be imperfect, my failings will continue to accumulate. As the Bible says in Romans 2:5,6: "You are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works."

According to another passage, the law of God is holy, and his commandments are righteous and good, but the law makes man very conscious of his weakness, his failures, his unworthy and defiled condition because of sin. The apostle Paul speaks for most of us when he writes:

"For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:15,22-24, ESV).

You see that instead of enabling man to win God's favor, the law makes him to constantly see how far he is from satisfying God's requirements of righteousness and holiness. It reveals that man needs someone to deliver him—he needs a savior.

The Impact of Sin v. The Value of Good Works

Think about this question for a moment in terms of the good works which might compensate for the

bad ones. There are many situations in life where it plainly would be useless to put the good and the bad on a set of scales. Suppose, for example, that you receive a visitor and want to prepare him a meal, using what you have on hand. You see three eggs and decide to make an omelet for your friend. Breaking the eggs, you discover that the third one is rotten. If you put this third egg in the omelet with the two others, telling yourself that the good eggs weigh more than the single one that is rotten, the dish will be spoiled and your visitor will not be able to eat it. Besides, you would never think of presenting such a meal to a visitor in your home. Even if your good works are twice as numerous as your sins, these noble actions can never cover up your sins or eliminate before the Holy One the sickening odor of the evil that you have committed in the course of your life.

Think, for example, of a woman who hates her husband and wants to get rid of him. She decides to poison him little by little, putting in his food every day a tiny quantity of poison, arsenic perhaps. The meals that this woman serves are good, nourishing, and full of vitamins and proteins and everything that the body needs. But the good ingredients in this food, even though they weigh far more than the small amount of arsenic, will not prevent the poison from having its effect. Sin is a poison. It kills, in spite of the presence of that which is good, noble and honest.

Think of a person who says many kind and useful things throughout his life. He tells the truth, he encourages others, he gives good advice. But when you question this person concerning his ideas about God, he shamelessly pronounces words of blasphemy and hatred that dishonor his Creator. The vast majority of what this person says is very good, but those good words cannot make up for the blasphemy that he commits.

Who needs the sacrifice of Jesus which God ordained? Who among us needs Allah to take from the scales of justice our bad deeds so that we may not be condemned on the last day? It is clear that all of us need this. Everyone needs God's forgiveness, because all have sinned. Even though I may not have broken all of God's commandments, I am a sinner and I am unworthy to present myself before God. All my good works combined will never change this reality. We all need the grace that has been made possible by the death of Jesus, planned by God from the beginning.