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Reconciling the Divine Decree and Free Will in Islam

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Introduction

In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful

The idea of divine providence also known as the divine decree or predestination—that everything has already been decreed by the Creator from eternity—has troubled theologians and philosophers for centuries. How can we reconcile the two apparently contradictory facts that Allah has absolute power and sovereignty over all creation, and that at the same time we are responsible for our actions? Are we forced to do what we do, or are our choices meaningful?

This question led to one of the earliest sectarian schisms in the Muslim community, between the Qadarites, who believed in absolute human free will (Allah has no control over us), and the Jabarites, who believed in absolute determinism and fatalism (we have no control over our actions). Each of these groups developed an extreme and misguided theology. If Allah has no control, then why call upon Allah in prayer? And if we have no control over our actions and fate, why do any good deeds at all?

Not only was this question a sharp controversy in early Islamic history, it has been an important issue throughout history for both religious and secular reasons. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote seriously on the topic over two thousand years ago because of its implications for understanding order in the universe, the origin of life, human freedom, and happiness.¹ Today, it is the subject of complex academic debate, under the heading of *determinism*, in scientific disciplines such as mathematics, physics, biology, psychology, and social science.² Clearly, our understanding of destiny plays a decisive role in both our view of the world and, perhaps more importantly, our behavior in it. Muslims have also experienced doubts in their faith due to the myriad of philosophical conundrums that arise from it. How does Islam solve the riddle?

The Quran and Sunnah take a middle path between the two historical extremes, upholding both the sovereignty of Allah and the responsibility of humankind. From a purely rational standpoint, these two aspects seem mutually exclusive; in other words, it seems they cannot both be true. However, we have to remember that

¹ Dudley, John. *Aristotle's Concept of Chance: Accidents, Cause, Necessity, and Determinism*. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012), 2.

² Atmanspacher, Harald, and Robert Bishop. *Between Chance and Choice: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Determinism*. (Thorverton: Imprint Academic, 2002) 1-3.

Allah exists outside of time and space, beyond the cosmic veil in the Unseen. By contrast, we human beings can only conceive of realities within the framework of time and space. Divine providence, or predestination, is a reality that exists beyond time and space, which means we are simply incapable of conceiving it with our limited rational faculties.

For this reason, Allah communicated the reality of providence using the tools of language—in particular, literary imagery (*al-taswir al-fanni*)—which in Qura’nic science involves “expressing a mental meaning by use of sensory and visualized pictures.”³ These images are the Pen, the Preserved Tablet, and the angelic records of deeds. They articulate the nature of providence, that Allah has complete control over what is decreed from the beginning and what is later expunged. They are images that are not fictional nor merely metaphorical; on the contrary, they constitute profound truths in the universe and are realities in themselves. While all things have already been decreed from eternity, Allah has the power to change destiny based upon the choices we make. We are, indeed, morally responsible for our actions and our free will has associated with it a measure of control, limited under the sovereignty of Allah, to determine our ultimate fate.

The Nature of Divine Providence

The term for divine providence in Islam is *Al-Qada' wa'l-Qadar*, literally "the decree and the measure." It is a combination of two terms, which signifies the dual aspects of providence. Ibn Hajar writes, “The scholars said the divine decree (*al-qada'*) consists of the entire and complete judgment forever, and the divine measurement (*al-qadar*) consists of the particulars of the judgment and its details.”⁴

Although scholars sometimes defined the terms differently, the definition offered here is based upon two sets of texts in the Quran and Sunnah: texts that speak of the decree in absolute and unchanging terms, and texts that speak of modifications to the decree as it is brought into being. These two sets of texts seem contradictory on their face, yet they are two aspects of the same reality whose appa

³ Bughā, Muṣṭafā Dīb, and Muḥyī al-Dīn Mastū. *al-Wādīh fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān*. (Dimashq: Dār al-Kalim al-Ṭayyib, 1998), 1:170.

⁴ Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, Aḥmad ibn 'Alī. *Fatḥ al-Bārī bi-Sharḥ al-Bukhārī*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1959), 11:477.

contradiction is only the result of the human mind's limited frame of reference. And each set of texts is reconciled towards the united purpose of guiding us to right behavior, with respect to Allah and to our fellow human beings.

The idea of the unchanging decree is embodied in the literary image of the Preserved Tablet (*al-lawh al-mahfuz*), which contains everything that will come to be, including the divine scriptures.

Allah said:

*This is truly a glorious Qur'an [written] on a Preserved Tablet.*⁵

The term conveys the absolute reality of divine providence through a mental representation of a thing, a tablet, with which we are already familiar, even though the Preserved Tablet is unlike any tablet we have known.

The implication of the Preserved Tablet is that Allah knows all things before they come into existence.

Allah said:

*Are you [Prophet] not aware that God knows all that is in the heavens and earth? All this is written in a Record; this is easy for God.*⁶

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

*Verily, Allah Almighty created His creation in darkness and He cast over them His light. Whoever is touched by that light is guided, and whoever misses it is astray. Thus, I say the pens have been dried upon the knowledge of Allah.*⁷

Not only does Allah know what will be, He has full control and power over what He allows to come into existence. He can allow or block anything from ever occurring.

Allah said:

It is He who has control over the heavens and earth and has no

⁵ Sūrat al-Burūj 85:21-22; Abdel Haleem, M. A. *The Qur'an: English translation and parallel Arabic text*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 591.

⁶ Sūrat al-Ḥajj 22:70; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 341.

⁷ al-Tirmidhī, Muḥammad ibn 'Īsá. *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islāmī, 1998), 4:323 #2642; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by al-Albānī in *Silsilat al-Aḥādīth al-Ṣaḥīḥah* (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1996), 3:64 #1076.

*offspring—no one shares control with Him—and Who created all things and made them to an exact measure.*⁸

Moreover, the provision, life span, deeds, and ultimate fate in the Hereafter of every human being are written by the angels as soon as the soul is blown into the fetus. Our destiny was decreed for us even before we were born.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*The creation of each one of you is in his mother’s womb for forty days or nights, then as a clot for a similar period, then as a piece of flesh for a similar period, then the angel is sent to it to announce four decrees. He writes his provision, his life span, his deeds, and whether he is blessed or damned. Then, he breathes the soul into it. Verily, one of you acts with the deeds of the people of Paradise until he is not but an arm’s length away from it, yet the decree overtakes him, he acts with the deeds of the people of Hellfire and thus enters Hellfire. And one of you acts with the deeds of the people of Hellfire until he is not but an arm’s length away from it, yet the decree overtakes him, he acts with the deeds of the people of Paradise and thus enters it.*⁹

We are set upon a path, with our fate ahead of us, as soon as we enter this world. Yet our will and our actions are meaningful because, by Allah’s will, they are the causes of changing course. Since Allah is in control of destiny, the only way to secure a good fate is to appeal to Allah through worship, prayer, and good deeds. We have no control by ourselves. In this sense, the “pens have been lifted and the pages have dried.”

The Prophet ﷺ said:

Be mindful of Allah and He will protect you. Be mindful of Allah and you will find Him before you. If you ask, ask from Allah. If you seek help, seek help from Allah. Know that if the nations gather together to benefit you, they will not benefit you unless Allah has decreed it for you. And if the nations gather together to harm you, they will not harm you unless Allah has decreed it for you. The pens have been

⁸ Sūrat al-Furqān 25:2; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, 360.

⁹ al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 9:135 #7454; Muslim, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. ([Bayrūt]: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyah, 1955), 4:2036 #2643.

*lifted and the pages have dried.*¹⁰

Notice that in this hadith, the Prophet ﷺ informed us, through his companion Ibn Abbas (ra), that the decree has already been made. The pages have been dried. Even so, the Prophet ﷺ prescribed action: to be mindful of Allah and to seek help from Allah.

The important point to understand is that everything happens by the will of Allah, despite Allah not being pleased with everything that is allowed to happen. There are two ways in which “the will of Allah” is understood: the universal will and the legislative will. The universal will encompasses everything that is allowed to be, both good and evil. The legislative will consists of what Allah wants from us of good deeds.

Ibn Abi al-‘Izz, the commentator on the early and agreed upon creed of Al-Tahawi, writes:

*The researchers among Ahl al-Sunnah say that ‘will’ in the book of Allah is two types: a will that is preordained, universal, and creative, and a will that is religious, commanding, and legislating. Thus, the legislative will includes what Allah loves and is pleased with, and the universal will is what is willed, including all things that occur.*¹¹

The confusion that led to sectarianism in early Islamic history was due to the Qadarites’ and Jabarites’ failure to understand this point.

Ibn Abi al-‘Izz continues:

The origin of the error is from equating between the will of desire and the will of enacting, and between love and pleasure. Thus, the Jabarites and the Qadarites equate them both, then they disagree. The Jabarites said all of existence is by decree and measure, so it is loved and pleasing to Allah. The Qadarites said sinful disobedience is not beloved and pleasing to Allah, so it cannot be ordained and decreed by him; it is outside of His will and creation. Yet the distinction between what is willed and what is loved has been made in the Book,

¹⁰ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:248 #2516; declared authentic (*ṣahīḥ*) by al-Tirmidhī in his comments.

¹¹ al-Ṭahāwī, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad, and ‘Alī ibn ‘Alī Ibn Abī al-‘Izz. *Sharḥ al-‘Aqīdah al-Ṭahāwīyah*. (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1997), 1:79.

*the Sunnah, and sound instinct.*¹²

To sum this up, the Jabarites said Allah decrees good and evil and therefore loves them both, while the Qadarites said what is evil is not by the decree of Allah—which means it is created by some other power. The Jabarites denied the moral responsibility of humankind; the Qadarites denied the full power of the Creator.

The truth is that our actions make a meaningful difference and can change the course of the decree. By bringing our will to coincide with the legislative will of the Creator—surrendering our will to Allah—our fate will change for the better.

Allah said:

*There is a time decreed for everything. God erases or confirms whatever He wills, and the source of Scripture is with Him.*¹³

The “source of Scripture” is literally the “Mother of the Book” (*Umm al-Kitab*). It is the Preserved Tablet in which the unchanging decree from eternity is written. But the books of individuals, our deeds, and fate as recorded by the angels can change according to our actions. Ibn Abbas explained the verse, saying, “There are two books: a book in which is erased whatever Allah wills, and with Him is the mother of the Book.”¹⁴

In fact, things are being recorded by the angels, destinies are being fulfilled or changed, every single day.

Allah said:

*Everyone in heaven and earth entreats Him; every day He attends to some task.*¹⁵

Abu Darda (ra) asked the Prophet ﷺ about this verse and he said:

*Among His affairs are forgiving sins, relieving hardship, raising a people, and debasing others.*¹⁶

¹² al-Ṭahāwī, *Sharḥ al-'Aqīdah al-Ṭahāwīyah*, 1:324.

¹³ Sūrat al-Ra'd 13:39; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 255.

¹⁴ al-Ṭabarī, Abū Ja'far. *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*. (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2000), 16:480 #13:39.

¹⁵ Sūrat al-Raḥmān 55:29; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 533.

¹⁶ Ibn Mājah, Muḥammad ibn Yazīd. *Sunan Ibn Mājah*. (Bayrūt: Dār Ihyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1975), 1:73 #202;

Mujahid (rha) also explained this verse, saying, “Among his affairs are giving to those who ask, freeing those who suffer, answering those who pray, and healing the sick.” And he also said, “Relieving hardships, answering needs, and forgiving sins.”¹⁷

This apparent change in destiny is not a result of our own power and ability, and it is not outside the knowledge of Allah. Rather, it is only when we submit ourselves to the will of Allah that our fate can change for the better.

Ibn Hajar, the commentator on the authentic collection Sahih al-Bukhari, writes:

*What proceeds from the knowledge of Allah does not change and is not replaced. That which is allowed to change and be replaced is what appears to people of the deeds of the doer... Thus it falls under wiping away and affirming, such as the increase and decrease in lifespan. As for the knowledge of Allah, it is not wiped away or affirmed, as all knowledge is with Allah.*¹⁸

The catalyst for a change in fate depends upon actions: intentions, prayers, supplications, and good deeds. It is not the power of our actions in themselves that makes the change. Rather, it is the reward that Allah bestows upon us for surrendering to His will. In this way, humankind is held accountable for their deeds.

Human Will, Action, and Responsibility

The Quran and Sunnah are clear in expressing the moral responsibility of humankind.

Allah said:

*Each soul is responsible for its own actions; no soul will bear the burden of another. You will all return to your Lord in the end, and He will tell you the truth about your differences.*¹⁹

declared fair (*hasan*) by al-Albānī in the commentary.

¹⁷ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 23:39 #55:29.

¹⁸ Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, 11:488.

¹⁹ Sūrat al-An‘ām 6:164; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an*, 151.

This is the whole purpose of life; the great test culminating at the Day of Judgment would not make sense unless the judgment was just and meaningful. Hence, Allah delegated will to humankind to be used in the service of good. Our will is “free will” in the sense that we are not forced to do what we do. We are rewarded or punished in the Hereafter based upon what we did with our God-given will.

Allah said:

*This is a message for all people; for those who wish to take the straight path. But you will only wish to do so by the will of God, the Lord of all people.*²⁰

And Allah said:

*This is a reminder. Let whoever wishes, take the way to his Lord. But you will only wish to do so if God wills—God is all knowing, all wise.*²¹

And Ibn Taymiyyah, the Hanbali jurist and theologian, writes:

*Among what was agreed upon by the predecessors of this nation and its leaders regarding their faith in the divine decree and providence, is that Allah created all things, that what He wills comes to be and what He does not will cannot come to be, that Allah misguides whomever He wills and guides whomever he wills, and that the servants have will and ability, acting upon their ability and their will according to what Allah has enabled for them. Indeed, the servants do not will unless Allah wills.*²²

Thus, what we decide to do with our God-given will determine the fate that Allah assigns to us.

The essence of the matter is that good deeds lead to a good ending, and evil deeds lead to an evil ending.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

Good works protect from evil fates. Charity in secret extinguishes the

²⁰ Sūrat al-Takwīr 81:29; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 587.

²¹ Sūrat al-Insān 76:29-30; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 581.

²² Ibn Taymīyah, Taqī al-Dīn. *Majmū' al-Fatāwā*. (al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah: Majma' al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibā'at al-Muṣṣhaf al-Sharīf, 1995), 8:459.

*wrath of the Lord, maintaining family ties increases lifespan, and every good deed is charity. The people of good in the world are the people of good in the Hereafter, and the people of evil in the world are the people of evil in the Hereafter. And the first to enter Paradise are the people of good.*²³

And Ibn Abbas (ra) said:

*Verily, good deeds bring brightness upon the face, a light in the heart, an expanse of provision, strength in the body, and love in the hearts of the creation. And evil deeds bring blackness upon the face, darkness in the grave and in the heart, weakness in the body, a restriction of provision, and hatred in the hearts of the creation.*²⁴

In particular, the righteous act of maintaining family ties is a means by which Allah increases the amount of provision and the length of lifespan in one's record.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*Whoever is pleased to have his provision expanded and his lifespan extended, then let him keep good relations with his family.*²⁵

And Ibn Umar (ra) said:

Whoever fears his Lord and maintains family ties, his life will be prolonged, his wealth will be enriched, and his family will love him.

²⁶

Among the most important deeds that make a difference are prayer and supplication. In fact, nothing repels the evil of divine providence like supplication.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

Nothing repels the divine decree but supplication, and nothing

²³ al-Ṭabarānī, Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad. *al-Mu'jam al-Awsaṭ*. (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥaramayn, 1995), 6:163 #6086; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* ([Dimashq]: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1969), 2:708 #3796.

²⁴ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, Muḥammad. *al-Jawāb al-Kāfi li-man Sa'ala 'an al-Dawā' al-Shāfi*. (al-Maghrib: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1997), 1:54.

²⁵ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:5 #5985.

²⁶ Bukhārī, Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl. *Kitāb al-Adab al-Mufrad*. (al-Rīyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī', 1998), 1:34 #59; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by al-Albānī in the commentary.

*increases lifespan but righteousness.*²⁷

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

*There is no Muslim on the earth who calls upon Allah in supplication but that Allah will grant it to him or divert some evil away from him, so long as he does not ask for something sinful or to cut off family ties.*²⁸

The Prophet ﷺ himself supplicated to Allah for protection from an evil fate, recognizing that it is Allah alone who holds the power to decree:

*O Allah, guide me among those You have guided, secure me among those You have secured, protect me among those You have protected, bless me in what You have given me, and save me from the evil You have decreed. Verily, You alone decree and none can issue decree over You. Verily, he cannot be humiliated whoever is protected by You. Blessed are You, our Lord, the Almighty.*²⁹

And Abu Huraira (ra) reported,

*The Prophet ﷺ would seek refuge in Allah from the evil of the divine decree, from falling into misery, from his enemies rejoicing at his misfortune, and from a difficult trial.*³⁰

Similarly, it was reported from the companions and righteous predecessors that they would ask Allah explicitly to change their fate from an evil one to a good one.

Abu Uthman Al-Hindi witnessed Umar ibn Al-Khattab (ra) performing *Tawaf* around the House and he was weeping, saying:

*O Allah, if You have written me among the blessed, then affirm it therein. And if You have written me among the sinful and the damned, then wipe it away and affirm me among the blessed. Verily, You wipe away and affirm whatever You will, and with You is the Mother of the Book.*³¹

²⁷ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:16 #2139; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

²⁸ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 5:485 #3573; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

²⁹ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 1:587 #464; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by al-Tirmidhī in the commentary.

³⁰ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2080 #2707.

³¹ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 16:482 #13:39.

And Ibn Mas'ud (ra) said:

*O Allah, if You have written me among the damned, then wipe it away from me and affirm me among the blessed.*³²

And Shaqiq ibn Salamah (rha) said:

*O Allah, if You have written us among the damned, then wipe it away and record us among the blessed. And if You have written us among the blessed, then affirm it for us. Verily, You wipe away or affirm whatever You will, and with You is the Mother of the Book.*³³

Our predecessors understood that whatever came to be—positive or negative—was from the decree of Allah. In one instance, Umar (ra) departed for Syria and when he arrived, they found that a plague had broken out, so Umar announced that they would return to Medina. Abu Ubaidah questioned him, saying, “Do you flee from the decree of Allah?” And Umar replied:

*Would that another had said so, O Abu Ubaidah! Yes, we are fleeing from the decree of Allah to the decree of Allah. Do you not see that if you had camels descending in a valley with two fields, one of them fertile and the other barren, you would graze in the fertile field by the decree of Allah or you would graze in the barren field by the decree of Allah?*³⁴

Umar understood that whatever happened as a result of his actions was from the decree of Allah, so he should act accordingly and consider the causes of events. In this case, he avoided the plague as he understood it to be a cause of harm. People often mistakenly assume that trusting in Allah's decree means we should not act, like a person who does not wear his car's safety belt, thinking it has no effect on what Allah chooses to ordain. But Umar's example shows us that real trust in Allah means one should act upon the pattern of causes we observe in daily life.

Ibn Hajar comments on the statement of Umar, saying:

If he does so, then it was from the decree of Allah, and avoiding what

³² al-Ṭabarānī, Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad. *al-Mu'jam al-Kabīr*. (al-Qāhirah, al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat Ibn Taymīyah, Dār al-Ṣumay'ī, 1983), 9:171 #8847.

³³ Abū Nu'aym, Aḥmad ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Iṣbahānī. *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā' wa Ṭabaqāt al-Aṣfiyā'*. (Miṣr: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah, 1974), 4:103.

³⁴ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 7:130 #5729.

*harms him has been commanded. Allah ordains its occurrence while he flees from it. If he did it or left it, it would be from the decree of Allah. Hence, there are two perspectives: the perspective of reliance upon Allah and the perspective of holding to causes.*³⁵

This is the true way to rely upon Allah (*tawakkul*). It is to rely upon Allah in the awareness that Allah has decreed goodness for those who work for good. In other words, we have faith that if we work for our provision, then Allah will provide it.

The Prophet ﷺ said on the authority of Umar (ra):

*If you were to rely upon Allah with reliance due to Him, then He would provide for you just as he provides for the birds. They go out in the morning with empty stomachs and return full.*³⁶

And Umar (ra) said:

*Let not one of you refrain from working for his provision, supplicating to Allah to provide while he knows that the sky does not rain gold and silver.*³⁷

And this is the correct understanding of divine providence. We understand that the world is full of causes and effects, so we pursue the causes of a good fate, while we acknowledge that it is not the causes in themselves that we rely upon. The Prophet ﷺ said, “There is no contagion,” which recognizes that all diseases are allowed to happen by the will of Allah, and at the same time he ﷺ said, “Do not mix those who are sick with those who are healthy,” thereby acknowledging the role of worldly causes in the treatment of illness.³⁸

With this understanding, it is only Allah upon whom we depend to bring these good causes about. Every action we intend in the future should be qualified as only occurring under the will of Allah, because we know by our will and ability alone it will not happen.

Allah said:

Do not say of anything, ‘I will do that tomorrow,’ without adding,

³⁵ Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, 10:185.

³⁶ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:151 #2344; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by al-Tirmidhī in his commentary.

³⁷ Ghazzālī, Abū Ḥāmid. *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1980), 2:62.

³⁸ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:1743 #2221.

*'God willing.'*³⁹

The key point to remember is that the actions and causes, without the will of Allah to back them up, are essentially nothing, yet they are still necessary for bringing about a good fate. Action is always prescribed for the believers in relation to the decree, both before it comes to be and after it is fulfilled.

Ibn Taymiyyah writes:

The servant has two states of being in relation to what is decreed: a state before the decree and a state after the decree. It is a duty upon him before the decree to seek refuge in Allah, to depend upon Him, and to call upon Him. If the result of the decree is not from his actions, then he must be patient over it and satisfied with it. If it was the result of his actions and it is a blessing, he praises Allah for that. If it was the result of sin, then he seeks forgiveness from Him for that.

⁴⁰

Before the decree takes place, we should seek refuge in Allah, pray and supplicate to Him, rely upon Him, and put in the work necessary to achieve a good outcome. After the decree is fulfilled, we have to accept it and move on. If it was a calamity unrelated to our actions, such as natural disaster, then we accept it as part of the trials of life and continue to persevere in our faith. If it was a blessing, we praise Allah and continue to be grateful. If it was the result of our good deeds, we praise Allah for facilitating our good deeds. If it was the result of our sins, we seek forgiveness from Allah and do what needs to be done to make amends. At every point in time, the believers respond to the decree with action.

Accepting a calamity that has been decreed by Allah is one of the most difficult tests we face in life. In fact, the root word *fa-ta-na* for “trial” (*fitnah*) carries the meaning of “he put it into the fire, namely gold and silver, in order to separate, or distinguish, the bad from the good.”⁴¹ Allah puts us through trials because they are means by which we grow morally and spiritually. Indeed, some of the worst trials bring out the best in people.

Therefore, once a calamity occurs, we should accept it and carry forward. We

³⁹ Sūrat al-Kahf 18:23-24; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 297.

⁴⁰ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmū' al-Fatāwā*, 8:76.

⁴¹ Lane, Edward W. *Arabic-English Lexicon*. (Cambridge UK: The Islamic Texts Society, 1984), 2334.

should not dwell on the past by repeating the events in our minds over and over in despair.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*If something befalls you, then do not say, 'If only I had done something else.' Rather say, 'Allah has decreed what he wills.' Verily, the phrase 'if only' opens the way for the work of Satan.*⁴²

Accepting the decree—in this case—a calamity, is a way of instilling within us contentment and peace of mind, as we have faith that there is divine wisdom behind every event we may not fully understand. Saying ‘if only’ is the means for Satan to corrupt this peace of mind. Al-Nawawi comments on this hadith, saying, “‘It opens the way for the work of Satan’ means he casts into the heart opposition to the divine decree and Satan tempts him with it.”⁴³ As it is said, we should not relitigate the past.

Accepting the decree after the fact, though, does not imply not learning from our mistakes and negative experiences. The Prophet ﷺ also said, “The believer is not stung twice from the same hole.”⁴⁴ That is, we should not commit the same mistake twice, nor should we allow a negative experience to repeat itself if we can prevent it.

Ultimately, we have a choice to make in this life. We can choose to worship the Creator and do good deeds, or we can choose to ignore the signs of His power in creation. Regardless, the outcomes of our choices will last for eternity.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*None will enter Paradise but that he will be shown the place he would have occupied in Hellfire if he had done evil, so that he may be more thankful. None will enter Hellfire but that he will be shown the place he would have occupied in Paradise if he had done good, so that it may cause him sorrow.*⁴⁵

Each one of us has a place in Paradise and a place in Hellfire. Wherever we end up,

⁴² Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2052 #2664.

⁴³ al-Nawawī, Yaḥyá ibn Sharaf. *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alá Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. (Bayrūt: Dār Ihyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1972), 16:216 #2664.

⁴⁴ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:31 #6133.

⁴⁵ al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:117 #6569.

we will be shown *what could have been* if we had taken a different path, to either reward us with gratitude or to punish us with regret.

Imagine, for a moment, that you jumped out of a plane with a parachute. You have two inescapable destinies ahead of you. You will pull the parachute and live, or you will fail to do so and die. *Both of these possibilities have been decreed for you.* There is no third option. There is no getting back to the safety of the plane. It is up to you to make the choice and fulfill the destiny you desire.

In a similar way, we are bound for Paradise or Hellfire. We cannot escape the decree from eternity; there is no way to change what has already been set in motion since the beginning of time. Yet, the path leading to eternal happiness in Paradise has been laid before us. What we use our free will to do makes the difference. It is our decision alone whether or not we will take the first step of the journey.

The Mystery of Divine Providence

Why does the divine decree seem to conflict with human free will? Our notions of time and space limit our ability to fully comprehend anything outside of them. We are unable to conceive of an atemporal and alinear reality itself, let alone the essence of Allah Almighty's actions and decrees from beyond the confines of time and space. Past, present, and future are all categories that the human mind cannot escape, so we find it counterintuitive for our future actions to have been determined in the past. But for Allah, there is no past, present, or future, as He alone regulates time itself. As the Prophet ﷺ said, "Let not one of you curse time, for Allah himself is time,"⁴⁶ meaning Allah is the creator of time. Allah is not deciding a matter that lies in the future and waiting for it to unfold; He simply decrees the reality according to His will, "When He decrees something, He says only, 'Be,' and it is!"⁴⁷

In the end, divine providence is an enigma due to our limited ability to conceive of realities beyond time and space, and beyond physical causes and effects. It is a mystery in its essence, as free will and providence are an apparent contradiction. It is also a mystery in its details, as we often cannot directly discern the hidden

⁴⁶ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:1763 #2247.

⁴⁷ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:117; Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, 19.

wisdom behind the catastrophes and evil that Allah allows to happen.

As a result, the scholars emphasized that providence is a secret of Allah and that going too deeply into it philosophically will lead to misguidance.

The creed of Al-Tahawi states:

*The principle of providence is the secret of Allah Almighty in His creation that has not been given to an angel near Him, nor to a prophet or messenger. Exaggeration (al-ta'ammuq) and debate regarding it leads to failure, progressive denial, and a degree of transgression. Take every precaution against that kind of debate, thinking, and insinuation.*⁴⁸

Al-Ta'ammuq here means to be absorbed and immersed in the philosophical controversies surrounding providence. It was such exaggeration and extremism that led to the original splitting of the Qadarites and Jabarites from the main community of Muslims. To this day there are philosophers, theologians, and scientists taking the idea too far in one direction or another, away from the middle path of Islam.

Consequently, the Prophet ﷺ prohibited his companions from arguing about providence. On one occasion when they were arguing about the issue the Prophet ﷺ was angered and said:

*With this I have commanded you? With this I was sent to you? Verily, the people before you were destroyed when they argued over this matter. I am determined for you not to argue over it.*⁴⁹

The Prophet ﷺ also told us to be very careful and disciplined in the way we discuss destiny, saying, “If providence is mentioned, then be restrained.”⁵⁰

As such, the principle according to the great Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal is to accept providence as it comes, believing in “its good and its evil, affirming the narrations regarding it and having faith in them without asking why or how.”⁵¹ This is the principle of *bi la takyif* (without asking how) and it is the same principle that

⁴⁸ al-Ṭahāwī, Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad. *Matn al-Ṭahāwīyah*. (Bayrūt: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1993), 1:49-50.

⁴⁹ al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, v.4 p.11 #2133; declared fair due to external evidence (*ḥasan li ghayri*) by al-Albānī in *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīḥ* (Bayrūt: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1985), 1:36 #99.

⁵⁰ al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Mu'jam al-Kabir*, v.10 p.198 #10448; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'* 1:155 #545.

⁵¹ al-Lālakā'ī, Hibat Allāh ibn al-Ḥasan. *Sharḥ Uṣūl I'tiqād Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah*. (al-Sa'ūdīyah: Dār al-Ṭibah, 2003), 1:175 #317.

guides our interpretation of Allah’s divine names and attributes. Another expression of this principle is *al-tawqif*, which means stopping at the texts. Ibn Hajar quotes Al-Sam’ani as saying:

*The way of knowledge in this topic (of providence) is to suspend judgment (al-tawqif) at the Book and the Sunnah without resorting to pure analogy or reason. Whoever turns away from stopping (at the texts) will be misled and will stray into a sea of confusion. He will not achieve what heals the mind, nor what satisfies the heart, for providence is a secret among the secrets of Allah Almighty.*⁵²

Because Allah is beyond the scope of our comprehension, it is futile to interpret “the Throne” or “the Hand of Allah” or “the All-Seeing” by comparing them to our mundane realities. Although the words are familiar to us and the general meaning is plain, the deeper realities are inconceivable. In the same way, we understand the simple reality of providence through the literary images of the Pen, the Preserved Tablet, and the records of deeds. Any investigation after this is impossible and will lead us astray.

Rational analysis and philosophical deliberation have their place, to be sure, but certain divine realities are outside the limits of the human mind. Far from being blind uncritical faith, understanding this requires a principled recognition of our humility before the truths in the Unseen, that what lies beyond our senses is an expansive unknowable reality.

Conclusion

Divine providence is one of the six articles of faith in Islam, yet it was one of the first concepts to be disputed, leading to sectarianism in the early generations. The apparent conflict is between the sovereignty of Allah and the responsibility of humankind. Unable to reconcile these two realities, the Qadarites and the Jabarites weighed one idea over the other, each producing an incomplete theology.

The Quran and Sunnah follow a middle path between the two extremes. Allah is sovereign over the universe, knows all things before they happen, and decrees them into existence with limitless power. At the same time, Allah delegated will to

⁵² Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, 11:477.

human beings to test their deeds, culminating in the Day of Judgment.

The reality of providence is conveyed to us through the literary images of the Pen, the Preserved Tablet, and the records of deeds. Allah decreed all things on the Preserved Tablet, which in an absolute sense does not change. However, the fulfillment of those decrees can change based upon the actions we take. If Allah decreed an evil fate for us, He may change it if we sincerely supplicate to him or perform a good deed for His sake. Our God-given will, subordinate to the will of Allah, directs the destiny Allah brings into being for us. All people ultimately have two possible destinations decreed in the afterlife, Paradise or Hellfire, and only one of them will be fulfilled.

These literary images are the best and easiest way to understand what is an otherwise complicated philosophical controversy. In light of this, the scholars told us to suspend judgment at the texts and to avoid the hazards of debating this topic.

Success comes from Allah, and Allah knows best.