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The Infinitely Merciful and the Question of Hellfire

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In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

Is Allah really more merciful with us than even our own mothers? How can that be possible when He created Hellfire and will cast some people into it?

The study [Modern Pathways to Doubt in Islam](#), published by the Yaqeen Institute, determined that many young Muslims find it difficult to reconcile the idea of a Merciful God with the existence of hellfire. Similarly, the claim of the “New Atheists” that the very concept of tortuous damnation found within Islam and Christianity grates against our sense of justice. As a result, many Muslims today need to understand this concept in order to restore their faith and conviction in the Almighty. In this particular paper, we will not delve into the impossibility of fully sizing up an infinite and unseen God through the limited lens of finite human perception, nor the many writings of Muslim and Christian theologians across the centuries about reconciling God’s mercy with His punishment. This case study will focus on one famous tradition of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ regarding God's mercy and the hellfire, and will refute the claim that this tradition is counterintuitive.

‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (may Allah be pleased with him) narrates that a captive woman was once [frantically] searching until she suddenly found a small boy among the captives. She pulled him to her stomach and breastfed him, at which point the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said to us, “Do you think this woman would throw her child into a fire?” We said, “No, O Messenger of Allah, not while she is capable of not throwing him.” The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Allah is certainly more merciful with His servants than this woman is with her child.”¹

Allah (the Majestic) describes Himself repeatedly in the Quran as *Arḥam ar-Rāḥimeen* (literally: the most merciful of those who show mercy),² and says that His mercy encompasses all things.³ His Prophet ﷺ described Him as more merciful with His servants than a mother is with her child, and more merciful with His servant than the servant is with himself. There is no clearer, more recurring,

¹ Collected by al-Bukhāri (5653) and Muslim (6912)

² *Surat al-A‘rāf* (7): 151, *Surat Yūsuf* (12): 64, *Surat Yūsuf* (12): 93, and *Surat al-Anbiyā’* (21): 83

³ *Surat al-A‘rāf* (7): 156; *Sahih International Translation*

fact in the Quran or Sunnah, after that of Allah being unique in His Oneness, than that He possesses unimaginable mercy and compassion. How then can this be reconciled with the fact that God would punish some people with Hellfire?

Allah must be more merciful than all, since He is the One who endowed His creation with the aptitude for mercy in the first place

No mercy can outdo the mercy of Allah, since every mercy is but a manifestation of His mercy. For this reason, Ibn Taymiya (d. 728H, may Allah bestow mercy on him) said, “Allah is more merciful with His servants than the most merciful mother is with her child, for the One who made her merciful is more merciful than her.”⁴ The Prophet ﷺ alluded to this phenomenon when asked why he was weeping for a dying infant, by saying, “These [tears] are a mercy that Allah places in the hearts of whomever He wishes.”⁵ In another hadith, the Prophet ﷺ elaborated,

Belonging to Allah are one hundred [portions of] mercy, of which He sent down a single mercy [and divided it] among the jinn, humans, animals, and insects. Because of it, they are compassionate with one another; and because of it, they are merciful with one another; and because of it, a beast is compassionate with her child - to the point that a horse lifts its hoof in fear of hurting its newborn...⁶

How then can anyone exceed Allah in mercy, when they are all void of any mercy except that which He infused into their hearts?

A mother's mercy is but a fraction of Allah's universal mercy which every human being enjoys in this life

In this world, He shows immeasurable mercy universally to all people, regardless of whether they believe, disbelieve, obey, or defy Him. This universal mercy

⁴ *Majmū' al-Fatāwā* (16/448) by Ibn Taymiya

⁵ Collected by al-Bukhārī (1284) and Muslim (923)

⁶ Collected by Muslim (6908), Ibn Mājah (4293), and Ahmad (9607)

includes giving them life, supplying them with a lifetime of food, drink, cures, protection, and so much more. Every breath of oxygen, ray of sunshine, drop of rain, moment of motherly love, act of kindness, averted tragedy, is one of the observable manifestations of this mercy. As for the vast majority of His mercy, it goes unnoticed – either because it is unseen, or subtle, or lost in the abyss of human forgetfulness. In another wording of the earlier hadith, the Prophet ﷺ said,

On the day when Allah created mercy, He created mercy to be one hundred [portions]. He retained with Him ninety-nine [portions of] mercy, and divided amidst His entire creation a single mercy. If the disbeliever were to realize all the mercy that is with Allah, he would never despair of [entering] Paradise. And if the believer were to realize all the punishment that is with Allah, he would never feel secure from Hellfire.⁷

Therefore, although people receive varying degrees of God’s mercy in their respective lives, they will all receive more mercy from Allah in this life than from anyone else – mothers included. So if Allah showed nobody mercy in the afterlife, He has already been more merciful and compassionate with humanity than their own mothers.

Allah has reserved an even greater mercy for the believers in the afterlife

In the hereafter, His mercy will be even greater, ninety-nine times greater, and witnessing its magnitude will be mind boggling. As ‘Abdullāh b. Mas‘ūd (may Allah be pleased with him) said, “People will continue receiving mercy on the Day of Resurrection, to the point that [even] the heart of Iblees (Satan) will quiver [in hope], due to what he sees of Allah’s mercy and the intercession of the intercessors.”⁸ However, this special mercy will be reserved for the believers. For every believer on that day, being subject to Allah’s mercy – and nobody else’s –

⁷ Collected by al-Bukhāri (6000, 6469)

⁸ *At-Tadhkira* (1/797) by al-Qurtubi

will be their aspiration. As Ḥammād b. Salama (may Allah bestow mercy on him) said, “I swear by Allah, were I given the choice between Allah conducting my reckoning or my parents conducting my reckoning, I would choose the reckoning of Allah – for Allah is more merciful with me than my parents.”⁹ Therefore, Allah being more merciful with His servants than a mother with her child applies to the hereafter as well, where “His servants” is understood to imply His believing servants. In fact, some narrations of this hadith state, “Likewise, Allah would never throw His beloved into the Fire.”¹⁰ Obviously, such language can only apply to those who aren’t rebellious rejecters of God.¹¹

Though the mercy of Allah is without limits, Allah is not limited by His mercy

The assumption that Allah *must* extend unconditional mercy to the disbeliever is problematic because it poses a stalemate between Allah’s mercy and His justice. In other words, if Allah dismisses all eligibility requirements for His mercy, that “benevolence” would necessitate that He be unjust. Thus, Allah (the Majestic) repeats throughout the Quran: “Or do those who commit evils think We will make them like those who have believed and done righteous deeds – [make them] equal in their life and their death? Evil is that which they judge.”¹² “Or should We treat those who believe and do righteous deeds like corrupters in the land? Or should We treat those who fear Allah like the wicked?”¹³ “Then will We treat those who submit (the Muslims) like the criminals? What is [the matter] with you? How do you judge?”¹⁴

The perfect names and attributes of Allah are harmonious; they exist in unison without trumping one another. For this reason, the vastness of Allah’s mercy is often coupled with a reference to His divine justice. In the Quran, for instance, the

⁹ *Siyar A’lām an-Nubalā’* (7/445) by adh-Dhahabi

¹⁰ Collected by al-Hākim from Anas (rA), and by al-Albāni in *Sahīh al-Jāmi’* (7095)

¹¹ Allah (the Most High) said, “But if they [stubbornly] turn away – then indeed, Allah does not love the disbelievers.” *Surat Āl-‘Imrān* (3): 32

¹² *Surat al-Jāthiya* (45): 21

¹³ *Surat Sād* (38): 28

¹⁴ *Surat al-Qalam* (68): 35-36

Most High says, “My mercy encompasses all things – so I will decree it [especially] for those who fear Me.”¹⁵ Ibn Abi Jamra (d. 599H, may Allah bestow mercy on him) explains, “It is universal in terms of adequacy (i.e., can accommodate everyone), but specific in terms of who it is decreed for.” Elsewhere, Allah says, “Indeed, the mercy of Allah is near to the doers of good.”¹⁶ In the Sunnah, for instance, the Prophet ﷺ said, “And [know that] Allah only shows mercy to the merciful among His slaves.”¹⁷ Hence, from the perfection of Allah’s justice and wisdom is that He differentiates between His allies and His enemies; those who obeyed Him and those who disobeyed Him; those who devoted their lives to Him and those who devoted their lives to opposing Him. If among human beings, treating an honest citizen and brazen vigilante equally is considered foolish and unjust, “then what is your assumption of the Lord of the worlds?”¹⁸ Notice that the Prophet’s Companions said about that impassioned mother, “No, O Messenger of Allah, not while she is capable of not throwing him.” Similarly, Allah would never throw His creation into the Hellfire, unless His justice necessitated that there be no other fate.

Allah sending His messengers and scriptures to mankind, and inspiring people to recognize and embody guidance, is the greatest mercy of all

Allah revealing the Quran and making one a believer in it is a far greater mercy than anything that anyone could ever receive. As Allah (the Exalted) says, “Say, ‘In the bounty of Allah and in His mercy – in that let them rejoice; it is better than all they accumulate.’”¹⁹ Ibn ‘Abbās (may Allah be pleased with him) and others explained that the bounty of Allah referred to here is the Quran, and His mercy is Islam; these are far greater than all else combined. It’s the life money cannot buy, the clarity that no genius can discover, the system that never disappoints, the

¹⁵ *Surat al-A‘rāf* (7): 156

¹⁶ *Surat al-A‘rāf* (7): 56

¹⁷ Collected by al-Bukhārī (1284) and Muslim (923)

¹⁸ *Surat as-Sāffāt* (37): 87

¹⁹ *Surat Yūnus* (10): 58

comfort that even mothers cannot provide, the strength that vanquishes every distress and anxiety, and the inner peace that no tragedy can undermine. And in the afterlife, it's this very same mercy that will qualify someone to enter Paradise, as the Prophet ﷺ said, "No one's deeds will admit him into Paradise." They said, "Not even you, O Messenger of Allah?" He said, "No, not even I, unless Allah envelops me in His bounty and mercy."²⁰ Only by the mercy and bounty of Allah are people actually moved to perform good deeds in this life, and only by His mercy and grace are these humble and flawed good deeds adequate to admit one to a priceless Paradise forever. Put differently, Allah sent His Prophet ﷺ as a mercy to the worlds, then conferred another mercy by guiding the sincere to embrace His Prophet's path, then conferred the greatest mercy by accepting that imperfect attempt in exchange for an unimaginable eternal reward. In this vein, the Prophet ﷺ also said, "If Allah were to punish the inhabitants of His heavens and His earth, He would do so without being unjust in doing so. And if He were to have mercy on them, His mercy would be better for them than their own deeds."²¹

Those who reject this opportunity and rebel against it have refused Allah's mercy, which He loves to impart, disqualified themselves from it, and opted by their actions for His justice instead. As the Prophet ﷺ said, "There is no one who loves to excuse [people] more than Allah. For that reason, He sent down the Scripture and dispatched the messengers."²² Despite that, some people will still insist – with their free will – to behave in ways that cause them to experience the punishment they denied and used to mock without end. For that reason, the Prophet ﷺ said, "...That is your example and mine; I am there to hold you back from the Fire and save you from it, but you are slipping from my hands and plunging into it despite my efforts."²³

In his book, *Kashf al-Mushkil* (Resolving the Problematic), Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597H, may Allah bestow mercy on him) said,

²⁰ Collected by al-Bukhāri (5349) and Muslim (7042)

²¹ Collected by Abu Dāwud (4699) and Ahmad (21589)

²² Collected by al-Bukhāri (7416) and Muslim (2760)

²³ Collected by Muslim (5671, 5672)

It was from His universal mercy to send the messengers and grant respite to the sinners. But when the disbeliever rejects Him, he exits to the station of stubborn rebellion, and thereby is no longer eligible for mercy. As for His special mercy, this is for His believing slaves; He is delicate with them in hardships and ease, beyond the delicate care of a mother with her child.”²⁴

These words of Ibn al-Jawzi make another important distinction that helps elucidate this issue further; namely that only those who stubbornly reject God’s message are ineligible for His mercy in the hereafter.

As for those who God knows did not receive the message, or could not understand it due to a sensory or circumstantial impediment, they will certainly be given an equal opportunity at salvation and mercy. The Prophet ﷺ said,

*There are four [who will protest to Allah] on the Day of Resurrection: the deaf man who could not hear anything, the insane man, the decrepit old man, and the man who died in the interval [between Jesus and Muhammad]. As for the deaf man, he will say, ‘O Lord, Islam came but I could not hear anything!’ As for the insane man, he will say, ‘O Lord, Islam came while the children were pelting me with dung!’ As for the decrepit old man, he will say, ‘O Lord, Islam came but I could not understand anything.’ As for the one who died in the interval, he will say, ‘O Lord, no messenger of Yours came to me.’ Their promises to obey Him will then be taken, and then word will be sent to them to enter the Fire. By the One in whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, if they enter it, it will be cool and safe for them [and they will be entered into Paradise].*²⁵

In another narration, “And whoever does not enter it will be dragged to it.”²⁶

²⁴ *Kashf al-Mushkil* (1/94)

²⁵ Collected by Ahmad (15866)

²⁶ See: *Ahkām Ahl adh-Dhimma* (2/1139) by Ibn al-Qayyim & *Sahīh al-Jāmi‘* (883) by al-Albānī

Punishment in the Hellfire contains multiple layers of mercy

Through punishing some people with the fire of Hell, God purifies them of their spiritual corruption, manifests for them the pricelessness of salvation, and avenges those they had persecuted. Hence, Allah grants several dimensions of mercy by the very act of punishment in the hereafter itself. Let us briefly elucidate each of these three dimensions, to better grasp just how such mercy is actualized.

Firstly, the Hellfire serves – at least for believers – a therapeutic role: to transform wicked souls into pure ones so that they can enter Paradise. Would a mother refuse surgery or amputation for her child after all else has failed? Would she deem such drastic measures as contrary to compassion? Likewise, a multitude of hadiths from the Prophet ﷺ indicate that “Everyone who does not associate partners with God will [eventually] enter Paradise, even if they commit adultery and theft.”²⁷ In another hadith, “When Allah intends mercy on whomever He wishes of those in Hell, He will order the angels to take out of Hell those who worshipped none but Him alone. The angels will take them out, recognizing them from the traces of prostrations, for Allah has forbidden the fire to eat away those traces.”²⁸ Ibn al-Qayyim explains in *Ḥādī al-Arwāḥ*,

The Hellfire was created to frighten the believers and to purify the sinners and criminals. It serves as a means of purification from the filth which the soul contracted in this world. Had it purified itself here through genuine repentance, good deeds which erase [sins], and calamities which atone [for sins], it would not have needed to be purified there...

Allah, the Exalted, has no desire to punish His slaves without reason, as the Most High said, ‘What would Allah do with your punishment if you are grateful and believe? And ever is Allah Appreciative and

²⁷ Collected by al-Bukhāri (1180) and Muslim (94)

²⁸ Collected by al-Bukhāri (770)

Knowing.²⁹ However, the wretched continued to alter their natural state and displace it from [the purity] it was created upon to its opposite, until the corruption became firmly rooted. So they were in need of removing this, and required another change and purification which transfers them back to health – since neither the recited and created signs of God, nor the pleasing and painful decrees He destined, reformed them in this world. It was for that reason that He provided them with more signs, experiences, and punishments that were superior to those in this worldly life – in order to uproot that evil and impurity which only fire can eliminate. And once the cause and reason for punishment vanishes, so does the punishment, and the reason for mercy then remains without opposition...³⁰

In other words, some people attain spiritual purity in this worldly life by following the signs and guidance of God, whereas those who do not are purified in the next life by having their corruption eradicated by the fire of Hell. Once their evil has vanished, the punishment no longer persists. Ibn al-Qayyim then continues to add an interesting rational inference, saying,

The wisdom of Allah necessitated that He appoint an appropriate remedy for every disease, and remedying the misguided requires the most difficult remedies [to endure]. A compassionate doctor may cauterize the sick person, searing him with fire over and over again, in order to remove from him the foul elements that sabotaged his natural state of health. And if [this doctor] sees that amputating the limb is better for the sick person, he severs it, causing him by that the most severe pain. This is the fate which Allah destined for eliminating extraneous elements which undermine good health against a person's will, so what about when the person willfully chooses to admit toxic elements upon his pure soul? When the intelligent person reflects on the laws of Allah (the Blessed and Exalted), His destined decree in this world, and His reward and punishment in the hereafter, he finds

²⁹ Surat an-Nisā' (4): 147

³⁰ See: *Hādi al-Arwāḥ* (p. 756-761) by Ibn al-Qayyim

*them perfectly suitable, appropriate, and interconnected. This is because it is all sourced in perfect knowledge, impeccable wisdom, and showering mercy. And indeed, He – the Glorified – is the True Supreme King, and His kingship is one of mercy, graciousness, and justice.*³¹

In other words, God's infinite wisdom deemed that the hereafter be an extension of this worldly life and reflective of it. So just as rigorous methods of treatment are resorted to for remedy here, likewise will be the function of the Hellfire there. Neither, when warranted and appropriately administered, is contrary to mercy in the least. Some may argue that a doctor would readily remove the painful element of treatment if he could, so why does God not purify souls without the pain? What Ibn al-Qayyim suggests is that it is the pain itself and the receipt of just requital that serves to purify the wicked soul.

Secondly, albeit a more subtle dimension of mercy, punishing some people in the Hellfire causes the residents of Paradise to be overwhelmed with gratitude when witnessing what their fate would have been without God's guidance and grace. Allah (the Most High) says,

*And they will approach one another, inquiring of each other. A speaker among them will say, 'Indeed, I had a companion [on earth] who would say, 'Are you indeed of those who believe that when we have died and become dust and bones, we will indeed be recompensed?' ' He will say, 'Would you [care to] look?' And he will look and see him in the midst of the Hellfire. He will say, 'By Allah, you almost ruined me. If not for the favor of my Lord, I would have been of those brought in [to Hell]. Then, are we not to die, except for our first death, and we will not be punished?' Indeed, this is the great attainment. For the like of this, let the workers [on earth] work.'*³²

³¹ Ibid

³² Surat aṣ-Ṣāffāt (37): 50-61

Such people will melt in Paradise out of their love for God, realizing what He saved them from, and knowing that this bliss is eternal and worth far more any work they did to receive it.

Thirdly, punishing people with Hellfire serves as a mercy for those who will be consoled by seeing their oppressors receive divine retribution in it. Just as Allah reminded the Israelites of His favor in drowning Pharaoh “while you watched,”³³ He will also allow windows to the Hellfire which grant solace to those who were abused, allowing some to observe how Allah avenges them against those who pillaged their wealth, killed their children, assassinated their character, and the like.

Perhaps these three reasons, and many more, explain why the mention of the Hellfire arises in the most pointed discussions on mercy in the Quran. For instance, Surat ar-Raḥmān is an illustration of God’s mercy from beginning to end, and yet it does not omit a short description of the Hellfire before a much lengthier description of the perpetual ecstasy of Paradise. This teaches us a necessary fundamental truth about the divine reality: God’s mercy is operative in all His actions and decisions, and detectable everywhere for those who reflect.

Conclusion

Consider the human being: dependent on Allah in every way imaginable. Consider how the blood pumped by each of your heartbeats is entirely dependent on Him; every blood cell has a fatal potential that only His mercy prevents. Consider the water He orders the clouds to release; every drop not choking or poisoning you is a separate mercy from Him. Consider a lifetime of smiles, restful sleeps, and close calls – all by His mercy. Consider how He draws nearer to His creation by all these bursts of His mercy, and then waits on them for ages while having no need for them; simply because He is the Profoundly Loving (*al-Wadūd*). Consider how He provided one scripture after another, refusing to withhold mercy from the latter generations each time their predecessors betrayed the covenants and trusts. Consider how He accepts someone who rejects His greatest mercy, the Revelation,

³³ Surat al-Baqara (2): 50

for an entire lifetime, and may have even persecuted people for believing in it, after a single tear of apology on their deathbed. Consider how He cannot be harmed, nor fears anyone's retaliation, and yet He defers punishment, permitting millions of chances to forget His servants' insolence and repeated treachery. As the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, "Allah has written a statement, prior to creating the creation, and it is written there with Him atop the throne: Certainly, My mercy supersedes My anger."³⁴ Consider how He obligated Himself with being unparalleled in His mercy, simply because He loves mercy and is the Infinitely Merciful (*ar-Rahmān*). Finally, consider how anyone sentenced to the Hellfire by a God of this nature must have certainly doomed themselves. "Indeed, Allah does not wrong people at all, but it is the people who are wronging themselves."³⁵

A Muslim needs to get settled on this principle which their faith and clarity requires, enhancing it to where it can instantly dismiss any notion that challenges it. In an era of unhinged criticism of religion and God, being anchored in certainty that Allah is more merciful with you, and with anyone whose fate you wonder about, than a mother is with her child, is not a given. It is generated by routine visits to His final revelation for contemplation, and nourishing your spiritual perceptions through ritual devotion.

We ask Allah to spare us from His justice, which we certainly deserve, due to our hope in His vast mercy, and our hope of being enveloped in it by His loving grace. *Âmeen*.

Note: Other dimensions of the "Hellfire Question" will be featured in future papers in shâ' Allāh (God willing), such as the issue of infinite punishment for finite crimes, and whether the Hellfire is actually everlasting or not.

³⁴ Collected by al-Bukhāri (7554)

³⁵ *Surat Yūnus* (10): 44