In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Where is God When we Need Him?

Omer Mozaffar

When we open one of the many commentaries on the Qur’an, we often find this same narration: We are told that in a Hadith Qudsi, Allah (SWT) says, “I am what My servant thinks I am.” Too often, when we read this narration we glide past it without much reflection.

Similarly, if we consider that the Arabic word for “God”—Allah—appears in the Qur’an no less than 2000 times, we may discover that as we read through the Qur’anic text we tend to glide past these references to His names and attributes. It is as if our eyes skip over the descriptions of who God is and what His qualities are, simply because we regard such “information” as too basic or, perhaps, as “common sense.” As we read through the Qur’an, it is as if we are looking for “rules,” even though we recognize at some level that the Qur’anic text is very much concerned with giving us some knowledge of Allah (SWT) Himself. In fact, knowledge of “rules” is secondary to knowledge of God.

What is my point here? My point is that if we glide past God’s own descriptions of Himself without paying much attention, and if we do not reflect upon the fact that God is to us what we make of Him, then the end result will definitely be that we will define God for ourselves without even thinking about it. If we do not carefully think about what God is telling us about Himself, then we will ourselves create a vision of God without even realizing it.

Thus, even though the Qur’an repeatedly describes Allah (SWT) in terms of his mercy and compassion, using such names as “The Most Merciful” (Al-Rahman) and “The Eternal Source of Mercy” (Al-Rahim), many of us imagine Him primarily as the Punisher. This is the result of not reflecting on how the Qur’an emphasizes some divine attributes over others.

Even though we speak of God as a source of love, in our day-to-day lives we too often act as if God is continuously looking for even the smallest faults and the tiniest of negligence on our part so that He may punish us.

If our primary image of God is that of a Punisher, then we will glide past the countless Qur’anic references to God’s mercy, compassion, and benevolence. Then we will find nothing but strictness, harshness, and punishment in the Qur’an. If we imagine God primarily as a Punisher, we will look at the world that He has created as full of impossible-to-pass tests and one punishment after another.

Accidents happen all the time. If you are a person who regards God primarily as a Punisher and you get into a car accident, you are likely to find yourself looking at that event as a divine punishment. You will add to your suffering by feeling guilty: “I must have done something wrong, or God wouldn’t have punished me like this.”

On the other hand, if you are a person who imagines God primarily as Him as the One who loves you, as the One who has constantly provided for you all your life and will always provide for you, as the One who overlooks your mistakes and ignores your shortcomings, as the One who is Just and Fair. In this case, you will look at the accident in an entirely different way—as a small nuisance, a small test, an opportunity to grow, or perhaps as a reminder of some sort.

You will have the confidence throughout the experience that He will take care of you one way or another; He will deliver you through to comfort.
I am making five points here:

First, when we read the Qur’an, we should focus on those passages that mention God. In fact, we will have great difficulty finding a single page in the Qur’an that does not mention Him. When we read the Qur’an and come across one of the numerous remarks about God, we should pause and reflect. What is the ayah saying about Him? Next, how does it relate to the ayat that come before and after? The ayat about Allah (SWT) are the very foundations of the Qur’an.

Second, when we define how we interact with Allah (SWT), we also define how we interact with the world around us. This world is nothing but an illusion, a veil. Everything in this world is temporary; it will eventually expire. Every life situation is transitory, whether you are a king or a pauper. Often, the world comes between us and Allah (SWT), and acts as a veil that hides Him from us. When we forget that the world is unreal, we also forget our priorities; then it is too easy to look at this world as our eternal destination and to forget God. To avoid such forgetfulness, we must implement—step by step—God’s prescriptions in our lives, so that we find ourselves moving closer and closer to Him. As we know, divine prescriptions are either obligatory or voluntary. We should not look at these prescriptions as tedious and lifeless rules, but as necessary steps to reach Him.

Third, we are often surrounded by people who are themselves lost, and, as a result, may harm other people without realizing it. We need to remember that God is closer to us than our own jugulars. He is always with us, with each one of us, always. When we feel abandoned, we must consciously, actively, bring Him back into our minds.

Sometimes, when we are stuck in a rainstorm and the wind is tossing us left and right and the water is drenching every inch of our clothing and skin, we may need to pause. We may even need to take a step out of the storm, if we can, and take a moment to renew our friendship with Him, before jumping back into the storm.

Fourth, we should ask Allah (SWT) for anything and everything. Too often, after we make requests of Him, we are not surprised when we don’t get those requests granted. If we are indeed defining who God is for ourselves, then we are also defining whether or not God answers our prayers. In other words, we are choosing whether or not God will answer our prayers.

There is a difference between the prayers of tongues and the prayers of hearts. Too often, when our tongues are praying for something specific, our hearts are asking for something simpler. Allah (SWT) may be answering the real prayer, the prayer of the heart.

Fifth, the Qur’an demands that we shouldn’t mindlessly follow the way of our ancestors, or of those around us, or even of those who we love the most. Instead, it demands that we make conscious, deliberate choices. Indeed, it tells us that life is all about making choices, that the stuff of our lives is found in the choices we make.

The most important choice that we can make, the choice from which all other choices emerge, is how we imagine God. The Qur’an talks a great deal about God, who He is, what are His attributes, how does He act, and so on. In other words, not only does the Qur’an tell us that our choices are decisive, it also tells us how to make our most important choice—it tells us how and what to think about God.

I ask Allah (SWT), the Turner of Hearts, to turn our hearts towards Him. If I made any mistakes in this essay, I seek His forgiveness, and yours.