

Why Do Bad People Become More Successful? | God's Law of Punishment in Disguise

The Law of Punishment in Disguise: Gradual and Subtle Decline into Punishment

Perhaps you have wondered upon seeing the blessings of tyrants and corrupt people why God's justice seems questionable: Why does someone who commits so many sins not face punishment? Why do they live in luxury and their wealth grows daily? Why does God ignore them while I immediately face consequences when I sin or wrong others? If God is just, why does He treat His servants differently?

Such thoughts and expectations seem natural and logical. However, the important point is that we only see the surface and are unaware of the real situation. Many of us consider worldly possessions a sign of God's love and assume that those given more wealth and perfection are more beloved by God—but this is not always the case. Blessings can be given either because of a person's gratitude or their ingratitude and sin. Those in the latter group fall into the law of punishment in disguise or *istidraj*^a.

Punishment in Disguise is one of the divine laws meaning a gradual and imperceptible fall towards punishment. In this state, the sinner sins more and more, while their wealth and blessings increase, until they wrongly assume they are protected from God's revenge and continue boldly in their oppression and corruption, unaware that God is waiting for the oppressors and that they are slowly approaching divine punishment under the guise of blessings. The law of

punishment in disguise resembles dangerous diseases that silently affect the body until the illness spreads and incapacitates the person in a short time.

What Is the Relationship Between Blessings and the Law of Punishment in Disguise?

Out of His infinite mercy and great love, God grants those who deviate and stray from the straight path a chance to repent and abandon disbelief, oppression, and sin. Many do repent and return to their pure inner nature. But sometimes, the sinner is stubborn and unrepentant, refusing to abandon rebellion and sin under any circumstances. Such a person falls into God's plot or His law of punishment in disguise: God leaves them to themselves, allowing them to sin freely, while also giving them abundant blessings, health, and even granting their prayers sooner than the prayers of the faithful and pure—because prayer is a means of drawing close to God, and some prayers are not answered promptly so that God's beloved may be called to Him sooner. However, those with rebellious spirits can fall so far out of favor with God that He quickly answers their prayers, not wanting them to keep coming back to Him.

Of course, possessing blessings or having prayers answered quickly is not in itself a sign of punishment in disguise. God gives blessings to some because they are grateful and use those blessings rightly in the path of truth. But if a person wastes blessings and uses them in wrong, oppressive, or corrupt ways, God's treatment of them is no longer merciful and they fall into the law of punishment in disguise. Islamic narrations say: "O son of Adam, when you see God granting you many blessings while you are sinful, beware [1]!"

The Law of Punishment in Disguise and Causes of Falling into It

One of the main causes of falling into punishment in disguise is lack of fear of the consequences of actions and shameless boldness before God. Sin undoubtedly has a negative effect, corrupting and darkening the heart, but not all sinners are alike. Many sin out of heedlessness and quickly regret their deeds, while others sin brazenly and deliberately, as if they consider themselves invincible. God provides opportunities for repentance and guidance even for these people, but they intentionally ignore divine messages, so there is no choice but to leave them to their fate.

Indulgence in blessings and being submerged in worldly pleasures to the point of heedlessness is another cause of punishment in disguise. Blessings and perfections are not always beneficial; often they distance us from our true self, God, and the purpose of creation. Our relationship with blessings should not disturb our balance or divert us from the straight path. Those who do not engage in self-improvement and do not purify their souls along with increasing blessings fall quickly in rank and may become lower than inanimate objects or plants and animals.

Denying divine verses [2] and mocking prophets or believers [3] also predisposes one to punishment in disguise. Such behaviors stem from the stubbornness and obstinacy mentioned earlier. Possessing special abilities or performing extraordinary acts by unworthy people is another example of punishment in disguise and does not prove their truthfulness.

Now that we know about the law of punishment in disguise and its causes, what are the ways to protect ourselves from it?

How Can We Protect Ourselves from the Law of Punishment in Disguise?

- Strengthening Faith and Observing Piety

Undoubtedly, one of the most important ways to avoid being fall into punishment in disguise is strengthening faith and observing piety. A true believer, even if they sin, does so out of heedlessness, not rebellion. God treats such a person with mercy and gives them chances to awaken and return to their essence and human truth.

- Remembering God and Thanking Him for His Blessings

Remembering the True Beloved, praying and supplicating to Him, and being grateful for blessings is a strong rope that saves us from falling into ruin and punishment in disguise. Gratitude especially plays a key role. Imam Sadiq (Peace be upon him) was asked: "I asked Allah, the Mighty and Majestic, to grant me wealth, and He granted it to me. I asked Allah to grant me a child, and He granted me a child. I asked Him to grant me a house, and He granted it to me. But I feared that this might be punishment in disguise." He said, "By Allah, with all praise be to Him, it is not [4]."

- Self-Vigilance and Self-Accounting

Self-Vigilance and Self-Accounting, *muraqabah* and *muhasabah*, are effective ways that protect us from falling into punishment in disguise. Self-Vigilance means watching over all actions, relationships, decisions, behaviors, and thoughts to avoid opposing God's commands. Self-accounting means evaluating oneself daily for what was done. Those who practice *muraqabah* and *muhasabah* never fall into

heedlessness, sin, or intoxication with blessings and thus avoid punishment in disguise.

- Seeking Forgiveness and Repentance

God's love and mercy towards us are indescribable. He never desires that we face punishment because of our mistakes. Still, we are free to choose our path, and God will not take away this freedom. So, if He sees us straying, He sends guidance and warnings to show the right way, and when we repent, He opens His embrace and overlooks all faults. Repentance and seeking forgiveness are key factors that can change and prevent punishment in disguise.

- Balance between Fear and Hope

Just as we should never despair of God's mercy, excessive hope or feeling immune from divine punishment is dangerous—so much that feeling secure from God's schemes is considered a major sin. A believer should maintain a balance between fear and hope: fearing God's punishment and avoiding sin, while hoping for His mercy and not losing hope in forgiveness. This balance prevents punishment in disguise.

In this lesson, we discussed the divine law called punishment in disguise or *Istidraj*. Punishment in disguise means gradual approach to divine punishment and affects stubborn sinners who persist in their corruption. In the law of punishment in disguise, God continuously grants the sinner blessings, who then indulges in them

and neglects thanking and seeking forgiveness, until finally they are punished. Many historical examples exist, from corrupt rulers and tyrants to ordinary people with lesser sins. What is your opinion about the law of punishment in disguise? Have you seen anyone around you affected by it?

References

- [1]. Nahj al-Balagha, Wisdom 25
- [2]. Quran, 7:182
- [3]. Quran, 13:32
- [4]. Kulaini, Muhammad ibn Ya'qub. *Al-Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 97

^a A divine Law of lavishing blessings upon sinners, who remain oblivious to seeking His forgiveness, until He gradually brings about their punishment and destruction