

287967 - Why did ‘Eesaa say “but if You forgive them - indeed it is You who is the Exalted in Might, the Wise” [al-Maa’idah 5:118], when it would be more appropriate in the context of forgiveness to say “the Forgiving, the Merciful”?

the question

Why did ‘Eesaa (peace be upon him) say ““but if You forgive them - indeed it is You who is the Exalted in Might, the Wise” [al-Maa’idah 5:118], when it would be more appropriate in the context of forgiveness to say “The Forgiving, the Merciful”?

Detailed answer

With regard to the verse in which Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning), “If You should punish them - indeed they are Your servants; but if You forgive them - indeed it is You who is the Exalted in Might, the Wise” [al-Maa’idah 5:118], the scholars differed as to the time when these words were (or will be) uttered:

1.

Some of them are of the view that these words were uttered after Allah took him to be with Him. Based on that, they said that what is meant is:

If You punish these people who said these words [i.e., their belief that ‘Eesaa and his mother were deities], by causing them to die believing in that, then they are Your slaves who are under Your control, and they cannot resist what You have willed for them and they have no ability to ward off from themselves any harm or anything that You send upon them.

But if You forgive them by guiding them to repent from that, then conceal their sin, then You are the Exalted in Might, able to wreak vengeance upon whomever You want to wreak vengeance, and no one can ward it off from himself; and You are the Wise in guiding whomever You will of

Your creation to repent, and in enabling whomever You will to follow the path of salvation from punishment.

Tafseer at-Tabari (9/139).

2.

Some of them are of the view that this will happen in the hereafter.

Based on that, one of the commentators said: ‘Eesaa will say that on the Day of Resurrection, and he will only say that by way of submitting to the decree of Allah, for he [‘Eesa] will be certain that Allah will not forgive any disbeliever, but he will accept the divine decree, and he will not know what they did after he was gone – did they disbelieve or not?

Ibn al-Anbaari said: ‘Eesaa did not say this thinking that Allah would forgive the Christians if they died persisting in disbelief. Rather he said that by way of delegating the matter to his Lord and so as to avoid putting himself into the position of objecting to the divine will.

What is meant is: if You forgive them, neither I nor anyone else has the right to object to Your decree, and if You punish them, then that is on the basis of Your justice, because of their disbelief.

See al-Hidaayah by Makki (3/1945).

Ibn Jizziy said: Here there are two questions:

The first is: Why did he say “but if You forgive them” when they are disbelievers, and there is no forgiveness for the disbelievers?

The answer is that what is meant is to refer the matter to Allah, and if He punishes them or forgives them, there can be no objection to that, because all people are His slaves, and the master does whatever he wants with his slaves.

This does not necessarily mean that the disbelievers are granted forgiveness; rather it implies that that may happen according to the wisdom and might of Allah, and there is a difference

between what is possible and what happens.

With regard to the view of those who say that these words were addressed to ‘Eesaa (peace be upon him) when Allah took him up to heaven, there is no problem with that, because what it means is: if You forgive them by causing them to repent, and at that time they were still alive, and it is possible that anyone who is still alive may repent.

The second question is: how do his words “indeed it is You who is the Exalted in Might, the Wise” fit with his words “but if You forgive them”, when it would be more appropriate in the context of mentioning forgiveness to say “indeed it is You who is the Forgiving, the Merciful”?

There are three aspects to the answer:

Firstly: it seems to me that because his aim was to submit to Allah and glorify Him, saying “indeed it is You who is the Exalted in Might, the Wise” was more appropriate, because wisdom dictates submitting to Him, and might dictates glorifying Him, for the Exalted in Might is the One Who does whatever He wills, and no one can overrule Him or prevent him from doing anything that He wants to do. So the words imply delegation of the matter to Allah, with regard to forgiving them or not forgiving them, for He is able to do both, because of His Might. Whichever of them He does, it is appropriate and wise.

Secondly: our shaykh, Ustadh Abu Ja‘far ibn az-Zubayr, said: Rather he did not say “the Forgiving, the Merciful” lest that be interpreted as implicitly seeking forgiveness for them. So he simply surrendered and delegated the matter to Allah, without asking for that, because forgiveness cannot be sought for the disbelievers. This is similar to our view.

Thirdly: our shaykh, al-Khateeb Abu ‘Abdillah ibn Rasheed narrated from his shaykh, the most eloquent imam of his time, Haazim ibn Haazim, that he used to pause after the words “but [or: and] if You forgive them”, as if the sentence ended there, and the words “indeed it is You who is the Exalted in Might” were the beginning of a new sentence. It is as if he said: Whether You punish them or You forgive them, indeed they are Your servants in either case.

At-Tasheel (1/252).

Ibn Katheer said: With regard to the words “If You should punish them - indeed they are Your servants; but if You forgive them - indeed it is You who is the Exalted in Might, the Wise”, this is referring the matter to the will of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, for He is the One Who does whatever He wills, and cannot be asked about what He does; rather they will be asked. It also implies a disavowal of the Christians who told lies about Allah and His Messenger, and ascribed a rival, a spouse and a son to Allah – exalted be Allah far above what they say.

This verse is of great significance and tells of wondrous news. It is narrated in the hadith that the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) stood in prayer one night, repeating it over and over until dawn.

Tafseer Ibn Katheer (3/233).

Ibn al-Qayyim said: Then he said: “but if You forgive them - indeed it is You who is the Exalted in Might, the Wise” [al-Maa'idah 5:118]. He did not say “the Merciful, the Forgiving”. This is the most eloquent etiquette before Allah, may He be exalted, for he will say that at a time when the Lord is angry with them, and will order that they be taken to the Fire, which is not a time for seeking mercy or intercession; rather it is a time for disavowal of them. If he were to say “indeed it is You who is the Forgiving, the Merciful”, that would imply seeking mercy from his Lord for His enemies with whom He is extremely angry. So it will be a situation in which he should accept his Lord's decree and be angry with those with whom the Lord is angry. So he will refrain from mentioning the two divine qualities by virtue of which Allah's compassion, mercy and forgiveness are sought, and will instead mention His might and wisdom, which are indicative of His perfect power and knowledge.

What is meant is: if You forgive them, then Your forgiveness stems from perfect power and knowledge, not from an inability to wreak vengeance upon them, or from being unaware of the seriousness of their crime. This is because one person may forgive another because he is unable to take revenge on him, or because he is unaware of the extent of his offence against him. What is perfect is the forgiveness of one who is powerful and aware, namely the Exalted in Might, the Wise. The fact that these two attributes are mentioned in this context is utterly appropriate and is indicative of good manners and etiquette.

Madaarij as-Saalikeen (2/358).

And Allah knows best.