

What is the meaning of Intercession?

al-shafa`a (intercession) is derived from al-shaf` which means "even" as opposed to odd, since the interceder adds his own recommendation to the plea of the petitioner; in this way the number of pleaders becomes even, and the weak plea of the petitioner is strengthened by the prestige of the intercessor. We are accustomed in our social and communal life to seek others' intercession and help for fulfilling our needs.

We resort to it to get an advantage or to ward off a disadvantage. Here we are not talking about an advantage or a disadvantage, a benefit or a harm that is caused by natural causes, like hunger and thirst, heat or cold, illness or health; because in such cases we get what we want through natural remedies, like eating and drinking, wearing clothes, getting treatment and so on. What we are talking here about is the benefit and harm, punishment and reward resulting from the social laws made by civil authorities.

From the nature of the relationship of mastership-and-servitude, and for that matter, between every ruler and ruled, rise some commandments, orders and prohibitions; one who follows and obeys them is praised and rewarded, and the one who disobeys is condemned and punished; that reward or punishment may be either material or spiritual. When a master orders his servant to do or not to do a thing, and the servant obeys him he gets its reward; and if he disobeys he is punished. Whenever a rule is made, the punishment for its infringement is laid down too. This is the foundation which all authorities are built upon.

When a man wants to get a material or spiritual benefit but is not suitably qualified for it; or when he desires to ward off a harm which is coming to him because of his disobedience, but has no shield to protect himself, then comes the time for intercession.

In other words, when he wants to get a reward without doing his task, or to save himself from punishment without performing his duty, then he looks for someone to intercede on his behalf. But intercession is effective only if the person for whom one intercedes is otherwise qualified to get the reward and has already established a relationship with the authority. If an ignorant person desires appointment to a prestigious academic post, no intercession can do him any good; nor can it avail in case of a rebellious traitor who shows no remorse for his misdeeds and does not submit to the lawful authorities. It clearly shows that intercession works as a supplement to the cause; it is not an independent cause.

The effect of an intercessor's words depends on one or the other factor which may have some influence upon the concerned authority; in other words, intercession must have a solid ground to stand upon.

The intercessor endeavours to find a way to the heart of the authority concerned, in order that the said authority may give the reward to, or waive the punishment of, the person who is the subject of intercession. An intercessor does not ask the master to nullify his mastership or to release the servant from his servitude; nor does he plead with him to refrain from laying down rules and regulations for his servants or to abrogate his commandments (either generally or especially in that one case), in order to save the wrong-doer from the due consequences; nor does he ask him to discard the canon of reward and punishment (either generally or in that particular case). In short,

intercession can interfere with neither the institution of mastership and servanthip nor the master's authority to lay down the rules; nor can it effect the system of reward and punishment. These three factors are beyond the jurisdiction of intercession.

What an intercessor does is this: he accepts the inviolability of the above mentioned three aspects. Then he looks at one or more of the following factors and builds his intercession on that basis:

He appeals to such attributes of the master as give rise to forgiveness, e.g., his nobility, magnanimity and generosity.

He draws attention to such characteristics of the servant as justify mercy and pardon, e.g., his wretchedness, poverty, low status and misery.

He puts at stake his own prestige and honour in the eyes of the master.

Thus, the import of intercession is like this: I cannot and do not say that you should forget your mastership over your servant or abrogate your commandment or nullify the system of reward and punishment. What I ask of you is to forgive this defaulting servant of yours because you are magnanimous and generous, and because no harm would come to you if you forgive his sins; and/or because your servant is a wretched creature of low status and steeped in misery; and it is befitting of a master like you to ignore the faults of a slave like him; and/or because you have bestowed on me a high prestige, and I implore you to forgive and pardon him in honour of my intercession.

The intercessor, in this way, bestows precedence on the factors of forgiveness and pardon over those of legislation and recompense. He removes the case from the latter's jurisdiction putting it under the former's influence. As a result of this shift, the consequences of legislation (reward and punishment) do not remain applicable. The effect of intercession is, therefore, based on shifting the case from the jurisdiction of reward and punishment to that of pardon and forgiveness; it is not a confrontation between one cause (divine legislation) and the other (intercession).

By now it should be clear that intercession too is one of the causes; it is the intermediate cause that connects a distant cause to its desired effect.

Allah is the ultimate Cause. This causality shows itself in two ways:

First: in creation: every cause begins from Him and ends up to Him; He is the first and the final Cause. He is the real Creator and Originator. All other causes are mere channels to carry His boundless mercy and limitless bounty to His creatures.

Second: in legislation: He, in His mercy, established a contact with His creatures; He laid down the religion, sent down His commandments, and prescribed suitable reward and appropriate punishment for His obedient and disobedient servants; He sent prophets and apostles to bring us good tidings and to warn us of the consequences of transgression. The prophets and apostles conveyed to us His message in the best possible way. Thus His proof over us was complete: "and the word of your Lord has been accomplished with truth and justice, there is none to change His words" (6:115).

Both aspects of causality of Allah may be, and in fact are, related to intercession:

1. Intercession in creation: quite obviously the intermediary causes of creation are the conduits that bring the divine mercy, life, sustenance and other bounties to the creatures; and as such they are intercessors between the Creator and the created. Some Qur'anic verses too are based on this very theme: "Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth is His; who is he that can intercede with Him but by His permission" (2:255); "Surely your Lord is Allah, who created the heavens and the earth in six periods, and He is firmly established on the throne, regulating the affair; there is no intercessor except after His permission" (10:3).

Intercession in the sphere of creation is only the intermediation of causes between the Creator and the created thing and effect in bringing it into being and regulating its affairs.

2. Intercession in legislation: intercession, as analyzed earlier, is effective in this sphere too.

It is in this context that Allah says: "On that day shall no intercession avail except of him whom the Beneficent God allows and whose word He is pleased with" (20:109); "And intercession will not avail aught with Him save of him whom He permits" (34:23); "And how many an angel is there in the heavens whose intercession does not avail at all except after Allah has given permission to whom He pleases and chooses" (53:26); "... and they do not intercede except for him whom He approves ..." (21:28); "And those whom they call upon besides Him have no authority for intercession, but he who bears witness of the truth and they know (him)" (43:86).

These verses clearly affirm an intercessory role for various servants of Allah, both men and angels, with divine permission and pleasure. It means that Allah has given them some power and authority in this matter, and to Him belongs all the kingdom and all the affairs. Those intercessors may appeal to Allah's mercy, forgiveness and other relevant attributes to cover and protect a servant who otherwise would have deserved punishment because of his sins and transgressions. That intercession would transfer his case from the general law of recompense to the special domain of grace and mercy (it has already been explained that the effect of intercession is based on shifting a case from the former's to the latter's jurisdiction; it is not a confrontation between one law and the other). Allah clearly says: "... so these are they of whom Allah changes the evil deeds to good ones" (25:70).

Allah has the power to change one type of deed into another, in the same way as He may render an act null and void. He says: "And We will proceed to what they have done of deeds, so We shall render them as scattered floating dust" (25:23); ... "so He rendered their deeds null" (47:9); "If you avoid the great sins which you are forbidden, We will expiate from you your sins" (4:31);

"Surely Allah does not forgive that any thing should be associated with Him, and forgives what is besides that to whomsoever He pleases" (4:48).

The last quoted verse is certainly about the cases other than true belief and repentance, because with belief and repentance even polytheism is forgiven, like any other sin. Also Allah may nurture a small deed to make it greater than the original: "These shall be granted their reward twice" (28:54); "Whoever brings a good deed, he shall have ten like it" (6:160). Likewise, He may treat a nonexistent deed as existing: "And (as for) those who believe and their offspring follow them in faith, We will unite with them their offspring and We will not diminish to them aught of their work; every man is responsible for what he has done" (52:21) .

To make a long story short, Allah does what He pleases, and decrees as He wills. Of course, He does so pursuant to His servants' interest, and in accordance with an intermediary cause, and intercession of the intercessors (e.g., the Prophets, the Friends of Allah and those who are nearer to Him) is one of those causes, and certainly no rashness or injustice is entailed therein. It should have been clear by now that intercession, in its true sense, belongs to Allah only; all His attributes are intermediaries between Him and His creatures and are the channels through which His grace, mercy and decrees pass to the creatures; He is the real and all-encompassing intercessor: "Say: Allah's is the intercession altogether" (39:44); ... "you have not besides Him any guardian or any intercessor" (32:4); ... "there is no guardian for them nor any intercessor besides Him" (6: 51). Intercessors other than Allah only get that right by His permission, by His authority.

In short, intercession with Him is a confirmed reality in all cases where it does not go against the divine glory and honour.[7]